A Johnny Liddell Novelette

by FRANK KANE

MANHUNT

WORLD'S MOST POPULAR CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

MAY, 1965

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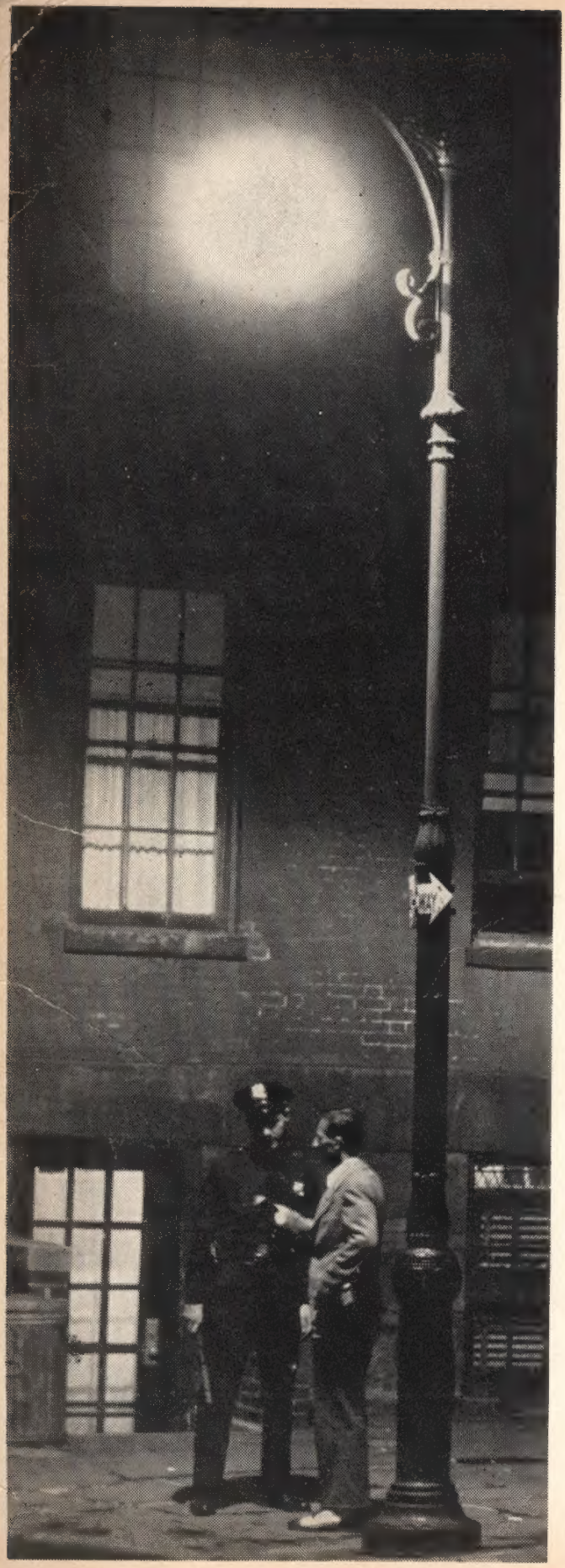

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GET MAN— HUNT

160 pages of MAYHEM MISCHIEF MURDER MALICE

see back cover

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MAY, 1965

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He'd been chosen . . .
thoroughly investigated and carefully
cultivated. Now he was ripe for the assignment.

kill or die

BY

CHARLES A. FREYLIN

He sat in the dark breathing easily. It was the fourth day of his vigil. Each succeeding night had grown longer and more wearisome.

From his vantage point he commanded a good view of the City. Paca Boulevard stretched five stories below, its three lanes curving out of sight to the southwest.

His post was a primitive campstool close to the wall under the one window in the room. A high window, it was streaked with months of dirt and film, but he had neither wiped nor touched its surface. It was open several inches from the bottom.

A Venetian blind hung dismally, down to the window sash, its tape broken midway on the right side so that a wedge of glass was exposed.

The slats were vented, nearly horizontal, but he had not touched them. He had debated mending the broken tape late at night, but it might be far too risky, and the Committee would disapprove.

Light from the boulevard lamps filtered through the dirty glass, forming spectral patterns on the wall behind him.

On this fourth night he crossed the bare wood floor quietly on stockinged feet, and for the fiftieth time listened with his ear pressed flat against the door. Yesterday someone had gone by out there. He had waited suspensefully, but nothing happened.

He was a blond young man, slender of build, who walked like a dancer. His hair was clipped short and he wore brown slacks which he removed and hung on the door knob every night. His shoes were tan and his thick brown sweater bore the letter E.

He might at this moment have strolled onto a tennis court and provoked no comment, for he looked the part. Or suddenly, should he join in some happy college song at a fraternity gathering, he would be regarded with approbation, for he looked the part.

He might have joined in anything frolicsome and be thought a natural part of it—until a closer look suggested a different story.

His eyes were black and chilling, deep and hypnotic, incongruous in an otherwise gentle face. His left eyelid had a mild ptosis—sinister in the best of faces. If his eyes told a story at all it was this: he was a young man to be feared, for he was dedicated and dangerous. He was waiting in this room to commit a monstrous crime.

On the morning of the fifth day, at seven o'clock, he watched for a signal from the Committee. They used a different car each morning. This time they were headed north—toward him. The driver got out, walked to the rear of the car, examined a tire, then got in again and drove off.

It was good practice with the field glasses; by far, the safest thing to observe. None of the passengers in the car had looked his way, but the message was clear. It was still on.

He rose and stretched his legs, carefully standing to one side of the window. Today might well be the day, he thought. He felt his beard; the stubble was soft and uncomfortable.

At first sign of the ceremony he would shave—there would be plenty of time. He must be neat and clean shaven, for his escape route was perilous enough without being conspicuous.

On the floor lay several sheets of newspaper—his bed. They were old editions from another city. The Committee had furnished them, and nearly everything else except the rifle.

In a corner stood a bucket with a makeshift iron lid. This served for waster products, for he could not leave the room.

Ranged along the wall was a stack of cans; he counted them. Six left. The empties were in the laundry basket. At noon he would eat another corned beef hash. For supper, the beans; that is, if he ate supper. He liked neither beans nor

hash, but things like eating were no problem for an ascetic. It was all part of the plan.

He couldn't see the rising sun nor did he look for it. This was part of the plan too. Since it rose to his left and set to his right he was never in its direct path. The Committee thought of things like that. Less reflection.

He looked at the rifle, then compulsively picked it up. He knew about rifles. The Committee had trusted his judgment—not him—on this one thing.

They had questioned him closely for weeks. Now he reflected proudly on that last most important interrogation at the warehouse . . .

"You have convinced the Committee of your desire to carry it out. Before we take final vote, however, we must subject you to final questioning. You have no objection?" The chief, a little man in gray, rested his arms on the long rough table, watching him closely. He spoke with an accent.

"None, of course," he had replied.

"These things are not a matter of course, Lark," the chief said quietly and several Committee members growled assent.

"None, then," he had amended.

"Does he smoke?" a member growled.

"Ask *him*, not me," the chief countered. "We are all to ask this time—there are eight of us and one of him. Our combined intelligence will more readily detect a loophole. Well, then. *Do* you smoke, Lark?"

"No. Is it significant?"

The chief raised his eyebrows at the member. "Is it?"

"Ha. He lurks in an empty room—never leaves it—in a locked, deserted building, possibly for days. The window is open five inches at the bottom and can't be touched. A wisp of smoke to the curious eye would confound the thing, wouldn't it?"

"Well said, Rego," another member growled, whereupon Rego slammed the table with his open hand, cursing roundly.

"I said there were to be no names," the chief said angrily, and when he said *names* he screamed the word.

Seven men looked down at the table with embarrassment, as if vicariously they had all erred somehow.

After a long glaring moment the chief had pointed at him. "It is enough," he said slowly, "that we know *you*."

"If he fails, we had better know him," croaked another.

"He had better never have known us if he fails," the chief said omninously.

In the ring of faces, not one manifested warmth, nor pity, even for itself to say nothing of its neighbor. In the ring of faces was a deadly sameness; to see one was to see them all.

He saw no trace of human warmth or compassion among this

determined council. He perceived that these keen observers resented a kind of gentleness which struggled occasionally to win his expression —that he was having trouble with it. Since this was not lost upon the Committee, it boded little good for him, for they saw it as a pitfall.

Thus, they had conducted this final inquisition, probing with questions asked on previous occasions, seeking to infect his equanimity—to enrage or confuse—and thereby disqualify him.

"You can get the rifle?" the chief asked, cocking his head far to one side like a species of trap.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Out of state. Weymouth."

"Where?"

"Central Gun Shop."

"Do they know you?"

He had shaken his head. "Not now. I haven't been there in eight years."

A member spoke up. "That's not long enough. *I* should know you in eight years."

"I have the disguise. Wig and all . . ."

"Wig and all what?" The chief kept his head to one side resting on his hand.

"Wig, dress, tinted glasses, make-up, handbag—"

"Then say so," the chief cut in. "Tell us about the rifle; you said you know about such things."

"In detail," said a member. "*I* know about such things too."

"I'll use a hammerless Savage, model 99F, .358 caliber, solid breech, lever action—"

"Weight?" the chief asked, his head everlastingly to one side. Weight was important going over a transom.

"Six and a half pounds," said he, instantly.

A member cleared his throat loudly. "Length?"

"Forty-one, three quarter inches." He responded to all of them but his eyes seldom left those of his principal.

"Go on," murmured the chief.

"Six shot—one in the chamber; no clip." He looked up at the ceiling a moment, squinting against a naked bulb.

"What about bullets?" said a member.

"One silvertip expander. There won't be time for another." He had sat back, hooking his thumbs under his belt. He glanced around the ring of faces, feeling he had scored something on them—spiked their arrogance. *There won't be time for another*. He could have added: or necessity. This was his point of pride. He knew none of them could touch his markmanship.

"What weight slug?" said a croacking voice, accented like the chief's.

"Two hundred grain."

"Why not two-fifty?"

"That's a slower traveling bullet," he said with supreme contempt. "The two hundred grain slug has

a muzzle velocity of 2,530 feet per second. Yours has 2,250."

The chief slowly straightened up, clasping his hands in front of him. "You mean a rifle bullet can travel half a mile in one second?

He had smiled. "Faster than that."

The chief cocked his head and rested it back on his arm again. "You think you've selected the best weapon for this?"

"Yes, I do. I've studied every detail of this particular rifle. For destructive power and ease of handling it would be my choice."

"What about a telescopic sight? Will you use one?"

"Definitely. . . . Four power, top mount."

Two members spoke at once. "What about reflection?"

"I have transparent weatherproof lens caps—they have a yellow tinge. I put them on the field glasses too."

Nobody spoke for several moments, then one by one the members looked to their chief, who sat upright again, tapping reflectively on the table. "You seem to know what you're doing," the chief said slowly.

"Why are details on the weapon of such importance to you people?" he had asked, disdaining to look anywhere but at the chief.

"It's the one thing you said you could handle without help . . ." The chief studied his clasped fingers a moment. "If you can be trusted on this one detail, you can be trusted on the others . . . more than likely."

"Is that it, then?"

"Oh, no. Not yet, Lark. We've been over the particulars a score of times, but let's be certain there's nothing left to chance."

A tall skinny member spoke up. "You have everything in the room now that you'll need?"

"Except the rifle, yes."

"None of it can be traced?"

"No. Identifying marks have been removed by your own people. The field glasses were stolen from the navy yard. Canned food labels were removed and burned . . ."

"Are prices stamped on the cans?" asked the skinny man.

"Rubbed off."

The chief said musingly, "As to fingerprints—we've been over that problem a thousand times."

"I've never been inside that building without my cotton gloves," he had retorted.

The chief said, "Of course, we expect them to trace this business to you eventually. You realize that." He raised his eyebrows at him, then looked from left to right at the members to be certain *they* realized it too.

"You said twenty-four hours would do it," he observed.

"Yes." The chief pushed his palms against the table and leaned back. "Give us one more rundown on the thing."

He had answered wearily, "All right. Where shall I begin?"

"At," the chief said softly, "the beginning."

"I drive to Weymouth tomorrow to buy rifle and scope. A gift for . . . my husband, I tell them. Halfway back I drive into the woods and change clothes. I test fire the rifle, then remove the stock and wrap the parts in brown paper. I return without my disguise and—"

A member interrupted. "What do you do with the disguise?"

"Put it all in a pillowcase—weight it with tools, then throw it into the Hotuxie River from the Mines Road Bridge. Upon returning I park in front of 2665 Overland, leaving the key over the visor. I am not to see the car again—nor expect to . . ."

The chief nodded. "Of course, if parking is impossible in front of—"

"Oh. I move on to 2665 Tenth, and park."

"And if—"

"If I can't park there I go to Twelfth, next alternate Fourteenth and so on to Twentieth; same house number."

A member at the far end of the table spoke up. "What if you're involved in an accident at any time?"

"There is no margin for such a disaster on the Weymouth end of the trip. If it happens after I change clothing, I proceed like any citizen, then contact the Committee for alternate procedure."

The chief leaned on the table again in his customary pose—head resting on his hand. "Go on."

"The night of September 17 at exactly eleven-fifty I proceed to the old hospital wearing clothes as instructed. I cross the yard at the rear of the building, by South Troy, and go in through the chapel. It will be open."

"If it isn't?" said a voice.

"Discontinue operation; something will have gone wrong. Contact the Committee for alternate plan."

The chief nodded against his hand, saying nothing.

"I lock the chapel door and cross to the main building. I walk up four flights by the central staircase. At the south end of the hall I climb into the empty room through the open transom. The door will be boarded up on the outside. From the inside I secure the transom . . ."

The chief held up his hand, staring down at the table. "I trust the designated member has seen to it the transom has a proper catch so it may be fastened from the inside?"

"Taken care of," said a voice.

The chief signalled him to resume.

He had shrugged and gone on. "Well, inside are the things I'll need for a week. I assemble the rifle by first light and begin the watch. At seven each morning I keep a sharp lookout for you—sorry—for the Committee. At that hour precisely, some ostentatious act will be performed by them in front of the reviewing stand. This means it is still scheduled. I am to have no radio."

His reverie was interrupted by the appearance of a group of men in the highway below. Now he was very much alone again in the room; the Committee was swept away by the undertow of the task at hand. He knew this was the day.

He watched the men through the field glasses; there were seven of them looking about, studying the reviewing stand, the surrounding buildings, even the overcast sky.

One of them pointed to the empty hospital building, so they all turned and looked; they seemed to be staring at a floor beneath him, but he couldn't be sure. It was a bad time to be using his field glasses. He felt a fleeting sense of panic. No doubt of it—today was the day.

A carload of ladies arrived on the scene, chattering like magpies. When he saw the uniformed police speeding south on their bikes, headed for the airport, he wasted no time.

Avoiding the window as much as possible, he began to load the laundry basket. He laid the newspapers on the bottom. Taking a long drink from the Thermos, he poured the rest into the cap. The empty Thermos went into the basket. He left the field glasses on the floor by the window.

He folded the campstool and dropped that in. Now followed the canned goods, a second empty Thermos and a badly worn Spanish edition of *Don Quixote*. The Committee had decreed this a fine red herring, since none of them was of Spanish extraction.

He understood no Spanish either, but then he disliked beans and hash. This was another red herring.

He pulled off his sweater and cotton gloves, then using a wedge of soap, the cap of water and a fragment of mirror, he managed to shave. It was harder than he had anticipated.

He dried his face on the inside of the sweater, combed his hair, then threw the mirror shard into the wicker basket. Now he replaced his gloves and rubbed carefully the surfaces of the things in the basket he had touched. He dumped the shaving water and soap into his waste can, wiped the inside of the Thermos cap and dropped that into the basket. The comb and razor went into his pants pocket.

He surveyed the room carefully. He had nearly forgotten the can opener and pocket knife. They hung on little nails driven into the lower window frame.

It was more difficult getting out through the transom than it had been getting in. Standing on the door knob, he released the home made catch and lowered the frosted pane.

Like a monkey, he clambered up the vertical pipe which ran parallel to the door frame. Meanwhile, outside, sounds of traffic had grown heavier; he heard occasional police whistles, automobile horns and distant voices.

Dropping to the hall floor outside the room, he paused motionless for a few seconds, listening intently. The passageway seemed immense after his confinement.

Among the debris on the floor were two empty wine bottles. On the lower floors were dozens of them, along with broken glass, plaster, sections of lead plumbing, discarded contraceptives, dirt and rubble. Because of this the building had been locked.

He glanced down the hall. The screen door was still on the floor; he could barely see it in the half light. He must not trip over it in his getaway.

The Committee had used old lumber and rusty nails in barricading his door. He wrenched at the scaffolding; it pulled away with little protest, nails and all. Two other doors had also been shored up with deceptive signs warning, FLOOR UNSAFE.

From behind one of the boards a package fell at his feet. He ripped it open. They kept the first part of their contract. Eighty-thousand dollars. The balance would be at the terminal.

Moving with deliberate speed, he gathered the lengths of lumber as well as the section of two-by-four he had used as a step getting in. He dumped it all in the basket.

Now he closed the door, stood against the wall and waited. Outside, the cathedral bell sounded. It was eight o'clock.

The waste bucket with the iron lid would have to remain. He moved it to the opposite wall so the opened door would swing against it.

Once more now—the plan of flight. First, one last hurried peek through the wedge of glass, not the open window. Already people with cameras were settling in the two front rows of the temporary reviewing stand. A few of them carried umbrellas, but it wasn't raining yet. A closed umbrella could conceal a deadly weapon, he thought. Of course, they would be watching for that.

He would hold his breath and lock the cross hairs on the chest of the man whose face he knew so well—pause—then one shattering explosion. Now toss the rifle and field glasses into the laundry basket, open the door, grab the basket, close the door behind him, turn left and run swiftly down the dirty tiled hall.

He would run for his life past the glass partition, the ancient wards, the cubicles on either side—tile on the right—wood on the left. Watch out for the screen door . . .

Fly, man! The deed is done. Pause at the elevator shaft; the car is frozen, rusted and jammed fast to the floor above. Drop the basket down the shaft into the pit through the partly open elevator door. Close it.

Now on through the other glassed partition—left at the corner

—left again, down the wooden stairs to the inner courtyard.

The stairs. Each flight would yield a streaking view of him. From South Troy behind the weedy hospital lot, through the little staircase arches cut into the side of the building, he could be seen in his wild descent. This had been a calculated risk.

Four flights swiftly to the ground floor where the bottom step is broken; a twisted ankle, to say nothing of a Pott's fracture, would be fatal.

Now left, over the ancient flagstones, past the bleak kitchen with its rusted kettles, the phantom chapel, the seven stone archways—into the vacant lot and the safety of the weeds, the ruined acre.

Run—be fleet of foot for God's sake—left again into the alley between the old nurses' home and the crumbling desolation of the morgue. Into a sashless window go the cotton gloves.

Now he would unbolt the gate, close it behind him and enter Farragut Street in full view of the world. The most dangerous moment. Seventeen measured steps across Farragut—not too hasty—now into Canal which stops at Farragut and goes no farther. One block from the deed—one block from the human commotion, the frightful hue and cry!

Right on Grand Avenue South and four blocks to the bus terminal. Into the men's room—under the washbowl—the middle one. Reach under; there's a packet with the rest of the money, the key and the ticket.

Now he would be on his own, henceforth unknown to the Committee. Contact them only under pain of death. If all went as planned, they'd be out of the country in twenty-four hours.

Now to the lockers. Number 511 has been in use by them since the sixteenth of September. His suitcase and new identity would be in there. No merry travel stickers, only an E, like on his sweater. Board the 9:55 and await its departure into obscurity.

He did not fancy himself a Zola, nor a Defarge, nor even an active liberator. Rather he beheld himself a Nietzsche, maneuvered by some merciless engine into despised immortality.

He abhorred his homosexual traits and detested the society which indicted him. By this weakness he had unwittingly forged one of the bonds which had linked him to the Committee. And they all knew it.

Guided by the scandal of his college expulsion they had tracked him down and systematically restored his confidence.

They had exploited his wavering allegiances and hatched their sordid philosophy upon a psychogenic vacuum. He had come to know all this.

Indoctrinated though he was, he would have eschewed a similar plot

against his own countrymen. But to conspire against a foreign power—to destroy the head of another nation—did not represent treasonous action: to this extent the Committee had been eminently successful with him.

It occurred to him that the shame and degradation of what he was about to do would fall like a blight upon the integrity of his country and settle there as a pall—for centuries. He felt this, but he was engaged in a conspiracy for money. Or perhaps he sought vindication for his weakness. A psychologist once told him he wanted to destroy himself—that he pursued posthumous glorification. Probably the Committee knew this, and counted heavily on it.

He had never known a father—only the legend of a quartermaster who disappeared in a single flash at Savo Island.

His childhood had been one of neglect, with guns and books his best companions. He had drifted away from a weak-eyed mother and a second father who hated him.

In seeking guidance of a father-image he had turned confidingly to male influences which could have healed his latent tendencies.

At the heterophyllous crossroad of his adolescence he had gone wrong; his pilot had been a bad one. In his college sophomore year he had learned that his aberrant leanings were irreversible.

He might have tried with Eloise, only because she had challenged him. They treaded water in the corner of a pool one evening where she whispered to him.

"I don't believe you," he said, aghast.

"Look . . ." She held aloft the lower part of her bathing suit. Then she giggled, looking pretty and frantic all at once. "Ever do it under water, Ralph?"

"You can't," he said, feeling confused and holding to the edge of the pool. "It's—it numbs you, or something. Eloise . . . somebody will see you."

She laughed. "Under water? Oh, you. Hold me then, and they won't." Then in a whisper, "Come on."

He had tried to explain to her.

When she told her friends, the word got around. He beat her face bloody on the campus and only money from his mother saved him from worse than expulsion. . . .

At eight-fifty the airliner landed with a smoky screech of rubber.

At eight-fifty the reviewing stand had filled with dignitaries. Paca Boulevard was lined with people. Through the gaping blind he watched where the road curved, three hundred yards away.

The car came into view at nine-ten. Through his field glasses he studied the occupants. Chauffeur and bodyguard were in front. *He* was in the rear.

Now the focal power of the lenses frightened him—as if they must see him too—since they appeared so close.

He saw the lady in the white hat. She was very beautiful, with a proud face. White gloved hands rested in her lap and she nodded dutifully, but sweetly, to the throng. The acclamation of the crowd was a dull impersonal roar in the empty room.

He scanned the face of the man he had come to kill. He knew it too well to be mistaken; he had studied it in a hundred photographs. The man sat on her left and waved to the crowd—little dignified hand waves, the wrist a pivot—a warm smile for emphasis. His hair was white but his face was young and spirited.

Dropping the field glasses to the floor, he grasped the rifle. He sank to his knees and rested it on the window ledge, the barrel protruding a few inches from the building.

Through the rifle scope the car sprang into view, in smaller but sharper dimension. The cross hairs caught the chest of the white haired figure—third button down.

Then he saw the child. Between the two visitors sat a little dark eyed girl with the same face as the white-gloved lady. The same face—except the eyes seemed larger.

She was clapping her hands, her eyes sparkling with festive joy.

He had been holding his breath to fire—now he breathed deeply again and the cross hairs shifted erratically up and down for a moment. She caught his eye again like a magnet, at eight o'clock on the telescopic field. The child wore a gay red jacket with red skirt, layers of crisp white petticoat bubbling underneath. Her bare arms and legs were tanned and chubby, and he saw with a pang that one of her upper teeth was missing.

Again the cross hairs steadied on the third button down. Something caught in his throat and the hairlines bobbed crazily again. Damn them. They hadn't mentioned a little girl. Oh, God damn them . . .

They were passing the reviewing stand now, a ninety yard shot. He had computed all probable distances with insane accuracy. At ninety yards, he thought automatically, as if it mattered, velocity is 1,989 feet per second under test conditions.

Time was running out, and his life with it. He had four seconds to go. After that the angle would be too difficult, the target close, distorted under four power. Already the optimum range had passed, the gap widening rapidly. Then too, the rifle barrel might be seen at any moment.

Again he studied the cross hairs on the chest of the man he had to kill, lest his own life be forfeit.

Four seconds is a long time, Lark. Four seconds will make you a rich man. Four seconds will make you a dead man. You have four

seconds to subscribe to Nietzschean perfectibility. Four seconds to kill a father. Four seconds to cast your shadow on a child's face. Four seconds to create centuries of invective in history. Four seconds to be what you cannot be—not by violence—for it is never attained that way, Lark; you are what you are.

He saw what had been prohibited to him in the innocence of the little girl. It didn't matter what she would be one day. It mattered that now she was a child—ingenuous in the clapping of her hands for a fickle mob who loved one moment and tore to pieces the next.

She loved. She loved in the sincerity of her artlessness, and was loved in return. More than that, she trusted as once he had.

He saw that to kill this man would be as nothing. But in killing him he would orphan *her*. He saw the unborn tragedy in her child's eyes, and it blinded him.

He saw the curse of his own deprivation as a metastasis and a blight upon a child who had never wronged him. Suddenly he knew this savageness could never be written in history. He would spare mankind the burden of his shadow. Either way now, he was doomed and he knew it.

He threw the rifle into the basket with a sigh the world would never hear. Disdaining any ironic conformity to the pledge he had violated, he left the basket in the center of the room.

They would be waiting for him.

I DIDN'T like the guy. Not a little bit. Still, he was a client, and right then I had no other client. So I didn't quite kick him in the rump and out the office door.

He was tall, though not as tall as me. He had red hair and blue eyes, and he was wearing a blue suit. He looked the gentleman, but he was not. He said, "Stand up so I can get a better look at you."

I wanted to tell him to go to hell, but I stood up. "Okay, now, turn around."

"This is a detective agency," I told him, "not a pansy shop."

"Turn around," he insisted. "No, that's too fast. Slowly. What's the matter with you, don't you know how to turn around slowly?" Once again I didn't quite kick him in the rump—not yet anyway, because right then I had no other client. Finally he said, "You'll do. You're the kind she goes for—big, brawny and a little on the stupid side."

I walked over to him and grabbed him by the shirt-front. I pulled him close til our noses almost touched, and I said, "Look, Mac, I can use your business, or I can bust you in the mouth. Which way you want it?"

He didn't flinch. He asked, "How'd you like a thousand dollars?" His manner was still snotty.

"I'd like it."

"Let go of me then." I did. He said, "Money buys everything. A thousand dollars buys you. Important people take bigger sums, but the principle is the same."

I measured his chin carefully for distance and angle, then decided I couldn't pack a thousand dollars of pleasure into even the best punch.

"A thousand for what?" I asked.

His lip curled into what I took to

BY FRANK GAY

I didn't like the guy. But a client is a customer, and a job is money . . . and the job in this case was also quite a dish.

THE SEDUCTION

be a smile. Very deliberately and precisely he said, "I want you to seduce my wife."

He searched me for the effect, but I hid the effect under "You're the first husband ever paid me."

He chuckled. "My wife and I are separated," he said. "We hate each other's guts." He proceeded to count out $1,000 in $20 bills and tossed them on the desk, cash on the barrelhead.

The bastard made it sound simple, but it wasn't simple at all. It was blackmail or divorce, I didn't know which. He wanted movies and a tape recording of the action. Then, because he was no ordinary bastard, he wanted more: to be there so he could watch. The way some guys get their kicks is awful.

I put the money in my wallet and told him, "I'll do my best to please you." The thing would have to be done with a see-through mirror—mirror on one side and window on the other. My apartment has a small dressing room which lies off the living room and faces the couch. The door of the dressing room would have to be rigged with the mirror, and a camera placed behind it so as to focus on the couch.

He presented another gift before he left—three pictures of his wife: one in street clothes, one in a bathing suit, and one nude. Now I'd know her no matter where or how I happened to run into her. She was a tall, lean brunette, about 30, all meat and no potatoes, the kind of woman you'd be happy to have around just to make ends meet.

I found Mrs. Thomas Quentin Wales precisely where her devoted husband had said—poised on the end of the diving board at the Silver Maple Swimming Club. I used the husband's card to enter. I would say that, if anything, the photographs didn't do her justice.

Her name was Michele, and it didn't take me long to meet her. After all, I'd been selected for the task by an expert. I passed myself off as a vacationing reporter for the *Sun*.

That same night I took her to dinner. And the next night, and the next. Each time we picked a discreet place because she said she was afraid her husband was trying in some way to embarrass her. Things were going so well I notified him to stand by because it was only a matter of time, and not much of that, til I'd be putting it to her.

The next morning by phone I invited Michele to the apartment for dinner, and she accepted. I'd had the door of the dressing room fitted with the mirror after that first day. I owned my own filming and taping equipment, and now I put them in place, the recorder and the mike under the couch, the camera on its tripod behind the door.

The recorder had four hours of capacity and could run the entire time. The camera was a different story. I intended to stash my client in there with it and let him press the trigger whenever the action got

hot enough to suit him. I hoped he wouldn't knock the tripod over in his eargerness to see all the sights.

He arrived half an hour before she was due. I explained to him what I needed and how the camera worked. Then I put him in a chair, closed the door and locked him in the dressing room.

She was gorgeous that night in a dress cut clear down to her bazoom. And what a bazoom. Like I said, she was tall, lean and dark, and I find such women completely irresistible.

I served her my best steak cooking. Afterwards I installed her on the couch with a stiff scotch on the rocks. Myself, I made a detour to the bedroom, fiddled with the alarm clock a moment, and then rejoined her on the couch with my own stiff scotch on the rocks.

Then the fun began. I kissed her, and her lips kissed back. I pulled her body closer, and it came to me willingly. I ran my hand down her back, across her rear and to her knee. Her response was to move her other knee out of my way. She was full-bodied and full-blooded.

Suddenly there was a loud buzzing sound from the direction of the bedroom. We both started.

"What in the world is that?" she asked.

"That," I said with disgust, "is the alarm clock. I must have set it wrong."

She laughed and kissed me again, saying, "Let it run down."

"It's electric," I replied when we came up for air. "It'll keep going all night." I put her drink back in her hand, apologized and went to turn it off.

I was not gone more than 60 seconds, but I could tell as soon as I walked into the room again that everything had changed. She was standing, her drink in one hand and something small and dark in the other. As I got closer, I saw that it was my wallet, which must have fallen out of my pocket in the wrestling on the couch.

She extended it toward me. She had it open, and I could see my investigator's license through the glass window. All she said was, "You rat!"

She threw the wallet on the floor, took her coat from the closet and put it on, rapidly and furiously. I thought she was going to walk out, and that would be the end of it. But I was wrong. There was one more thing coming. Her scotch. It hit me full in the face, ice cubes and all, and ran merrily off the point of my chin.

Then she walked out.

I looked at myself in the mirror, and I knew that bastard was watching me from the other side. I unlocked the door, opened it and stepped aside. He came out like a charging bull, knocking the camera and tripod over in front of him. I grabbed the tripod and saved the camera.

"You're a goddamned bungler!"

he roared. "You bitched it up royally." I waited, not saying a word, thinking he was the first husband I'd met to date who was hopping mad because I'd failed. "I want my money back!" he shouted.

That's when I hit him, even though right then I had no other client. Smack in the eye. He was going to have a real mouse there. He didn't go out, and he didn't go down, but he was a little fuzzy in the head. I waited maybe another minute, til he was no longer fuzzy. Then I opened the door to the hall, grabbed him and threw him out.

I spent the next half hour cleaning up. First I cleaned the apartment—wiped up the scotch from the rug and couch, put the camera and the recorder away, and emptied the ashtrays. Next I cleaned myself—threw my scotch-moistened shirt and trousers in the clothes hamper and took a shower.

Then I made me a fresh scotch on the rocks and sat down on the couch in my lounging robe. I had maybe three sips of it when the doorbell rang.

I opened the door. It was Michele. I bowed her in, closed the door and was caught up in her passionate embrace. "Darling," she said, "how I hated to leave here. It was agony. How was I?"

"You get the Academy Award," I said. I picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. I checked to make sure the alarm clock wouldn't go off again. I didn't want to be interrupted.

Give...so more will live

HEART FUND

HIJACK

When five free-lance hoods are looking for a score, the competition can get pretty deadly.

BY DON PEP

PETER KARDAGAS knocked a known knock on the suite door of the Mariotto Motor Inn and looked through the chain-barred opening when it was cracked open. "Any action, Frankie?" he grinned at Frank Salaver. Salaver dropped the chain and stepped back.

"All you want, Pete, any time around here." He replaced the door chain. "See anybody on your way in?"

"Like nobody, Frankie. And nobody saw me. Left my car up at the Carousel over the Maryland line and took a cab out here from D.C. Bobby inside?"

"He is and he's still drawing to inside straights," Salaver laughed. "He plays poker like he lives—fast and reckless. Want to sit in?"

"I like what I see," Kardagas drawled. "Deal me in."

Four other players slouched in lounge chairs drawn up to an over-

sized coffee table in the suite's living room, playing their cards and making their bets recklessly, carelessly, threateningly, sullenly or desperately—according to their individual personalities. They were hoods; not professional gamblers. All five shared the same vocational problem: their services—or their guns—were no longer required by either syndicate mobsters or labor leaders at the muscle level. All five had been told, "The day has gone, boys, when a torpedo or a goon is standard equipment. You bring heat, the kind of heat that's too hot to handle. The old days of the hit and the muscle have gone. In short," the philosophizing syndicate elder quipped, "get out of town."

Frank Salaver, a North Side, small time hood and full time torpedo from Chicago, had reacted in character. "So what else's new? I saw it coming. I always did have a yen to go back on the heist. You get it quick that way and get out. And you don't have to answer to any Mafia wheel who thinks he's judge and jury."

Robert Godessa had shrugged and made no more comment than a muttered oath. After he left the meeting, he turned to Salaver. "We're lucky we weren't knocked off instead of just being kissed off. What we know about those bastards would fill a stool pigeon's little black book."

Peter Kardagas had been less gracious and less resigned to his curt dismissal. "The pot-bellied, high-living Mister Big will come to a day when he needs a gun again. He won't be able to buy mine. But I hope some of his competition wants to hire it."

Salaver, Godessa and Kardagas had lasted in the Chicago area for a long time, enjoying well paid roles as bodyguards for a series of top level syndicate leaders and occasional better paid roles as hit men. All three had been known to sit through trials in federal and county courts, staring blankly at assorted court officials. When their current bosses had been acquitted or released on six figure bonds, Salaver, Godessa and Kardagas had been known to elbow spectators and police officials out of the way of their boss of the moment. News photographers learned early never to expose a camera within kicking distance of the three hoods. Precinct bulls learned to stay away from them or incur the wrath of syndicate leaders. And lesser members of the Chicago underworld learned early that a nod from any one of the three was enough to enforce the smallest wish or whim of whoever hired their guns or muscle.

The two remaining players in the game were younger and less infamous in the world of crime and violence. Gerry Bake and "Roughie" Clarkson were late-comers in the lower echelons of the crime syndicate. They had moved from East St. Louis to Chicago by way of the

Calumet City strip where Arcarro made a monthly trip south to look at his "suburban interests". The Chicago vice king walked into a drunken brawl at the Blue Moon after a pre-dawn party. Bake and Clarson, the two Blue Moon bouncers, had worked over the brawlers so well on the club parking lot that Arcarro took them back to Chicago with him. "You two boys are ready for the major leagues," he laughed when he saw the sadistic skill they demonstrated with baseball bats on unprotected shins. "I can use you."

The Bake-Clarkson team was useful to Arcarro. Unknown to Chicago police and Rush Street hoods, the two ex-bouncers straightened out a parlay ticket mutiny without drawing any undue heat to the syndicate boss. When Arcarro said, "No guns," they took him at his word. They used baseball bats—on heads, faces, arms and legs. They thought Arcarro was getting soft when he pulled them up at the end of three days mayhem during which time they crippled, mutilated and disfigured every ticket pusher who had tried to hold out on the football parlay racket. Bake and Clarkson came to share the notoriety of Salaver, Goddessa and Kardagas when they left the body of an Oak Park bookie, wired, in the trunk of his car. The wire had been drawn close—deathly close and fatal—in a noose around the bookie's throat. The traditional trade mark of a one cent piece, found on the slain bookie's forehead, might have pointed to any gangland hit man. But the marks of a horrible beating pointed to Bake and Clarkson. Their alibi stood up and Arcarro's attorneys sprung them before they were even considered for an indictment. When syndicate leaders agreed that the new police commissioner, Wilson, and the influx of F.B.I. agents intended to concentrate on open violence in gangland circles, word went down the hierarchy grapevine that Bake and Clarkson would have to go with their three elder merchants of the hit and the muscle.

It had been this order that eventually brought the five together in the Mariotto Motor Inn poker game —five potential and very capable killers. It had taken them five weeks to reach this eastern Virginia motel from the French Poodle bar on Chicago's North Clark Street. On that afternoon, five weeks ago, they had crowded into a booth of the tenderloin bistro.

"Are we out, like he said?" Bake asked.

"Like he said, Gerry, we get out of town," Frank Salaver growled. "And if I know Arcarro and his kind, we take him literally before we wake up in a cell. We're all suckers for a frame of any kind in this town and any law, from a harness bull in the sticks to the brass at headquarters, would go along with the frame. I'm going to make a couple phone calls."

"You?" Pete asked Goddessa.

"I'm getting out. Tonight."

"Where?"

"Hell, I don't know. Toss a coin. Detroit, New York, any place. What the hell's the difference." He looked across the table at Salaver, who had returned from the phone booth across the darkened room.

"Where you going, Frankie?"

"Detroit. I called Mikey at the Shamrock. He says there's no unusual heat in the town. I'm going to look around, lie around, party a bit. If I see anything, I'll stop partying and go to work."

"Want company?" Goddessa asked.

Frank Salaver looked around the booth table and scowled. Then he grinned. "This isn't company. Hell, Bobby, this is the makings of a ready-made heist mob. Why not?"

The five cars that moved east on the turnpike to Detroit carried five potential killers with guns for hire under the loosely accepted leadership of Frank Salaver. With no underworld employer bidding for their guns, each of the gun-happy, violent five considered himself a free agent, owing neither obedience nor allegiance to any mob or mobster. Frank Salaver was merely looked on as skilled in the fine art of crime and a veteran of the Midwest underworld. They checked into five different hotels and motels in the Detroit area in an attempt to keep word off the underworld—and stool pigeon—grapevines that the Motor City now harbored five of Chicago's worst. They were unsuccessful.

"Where's Roughie?" Kardagas asked at an after-midnight meet in a Dearborn Jefferson Avenue bar.

"You read the *Free Press?*" Bake tossed an early copy of the morning paper across the table. "Take a look at that."

Peter Kardagas looked down on Roughie Clarkson's picture on the first page and read the caption, "Chicago gunman picked up for questioning . . ." He read no farther. "What happened?"

"Roughie picked up some broad in the Motor Bar downtown on Washington. Another chicken chaser made a pass at her and Roughie belted him. He forgot he didn't have a license to brawl on Washington Boulevard like he did back in the Loop. The spot was full of law in a flat minute."

"Get him a mouthpiece?"

"I did. And a bondsman," Bake spread his hands open in a gesture of futility. "But you can't get action in this town like you do in Chicago. If he gets out tonight, he'll show here. The attorney—some guy named Columbo—told me to stay outside the city limits. That's why I said to meet me here."

Roughie Clarkson walked into the bar while Bake was talking. "They sure don't treat their tourists right in this gawdamn town," he snarled while reaching for Bake's drink. "That can on Beaubien is worse than Cook County and once

they get you up on the ninth floor they don't give a damn if all the mouthpieces and bondsmen in town are screaming to spring you." He turned to the barmaid. "Let's have another round, baby, and make mine a double Bourbon—Old Taylor." They made small talk while the girl was working the table.

"So what gives?" Salaver asked.

"So I've got a message, right from the Commissioner—from Gerardin himself—handed down by way of an inspector. I told him I was just in town for a little vacation. He told me to take my vacation some place else and that's not all. 'And tell your hood friends,' he quoted Gerardin, 'who came into town with you, that I've a cell for each one as fast as they're picked up.' And he named all of you by name. This town's a rat's nest of stoolies. I'll lay you five to two that your pads're staked out right now by Detroit law. I'm jumping my bond on this assault beef and getting out."

The invitation to leave New York came from a different source. The hot five again checked into different motels over in Jersey, widely separated in an area stretching north from the Holland Tunnel to the George Washington Bridge. But they met and sought their own kind in the West Forties of Manhattan. They got the word in an off-sidewalk bar on West 48th Street. It came from Sammy Mancuso, a syndicate lieutenant whose prime concern was peace and quiet in Uptown Manhattan—and a continuing take from the numbers and assorted vice rackets.

"We face the same sort of thing that Arcarro faces out in Chicago, boys. We keep things quiet or we lose money. Or worse, we get closed down by the law. I'm damned sure the five of you won't contribute to peace and quiet here. You're more likely to make more noise in this town than the Fair."

Kardagas growled. "Maybe, Mister Mancuso you should mind your own gawdamn business and leave us alone. What we're here for won't upset your money-making applecart."

Salaver recognized danger signals and knew the Uptown bar was no place for a brawl. It was owned by Mancuso and staffed by his henchmen. "Cool it, Pete. Like Sammy says, he wants things quiet. So do we. He pressed a knee against Kardagas under the table cloth and smiled at Mancuso. "Just in case you're curious, Sammy, we're not in town to bring heat. We're looking around but not at the rackets. Right now we're partying and we're good customers. Line up some dolls for us and join the party."

"Party all you like tonight, boys," Mancuso replied without a smile. "But don't come back. You fall in this town and we ride the beef. Every time one of us sits in front of a Senate Committee, we hear the same old accusation—that of a tie-up be-

tween me and Arcarro, between New York and Chicago. We try to make liars out of the papers and television newscasts who scream there's a syndicate. So you boys move in here. Your records from out west hit the first pages and it'll be the same old accusations all over again. You bring heat that we can't afford." He lowered his voice.

"So play it like I say and move on. Or else," he concluded with a flat threat. He walked to an office hidden behind curtains in the rear of the bar.

"Want to take the place apart?" Bake asked.

"I don't like the Tombs or Sing Sing," Salaver cursed.

"And I don't like the thoughts of a barrel of cement with me inside at the bottom of the East River," Kardagas agreed. "Like the man says, we move on."

"Move on where?" Goddessa asked. "Where the hell do we light where the gawdamn syndicate doesn't reach? Or where some slimy stoolie doesn't blow the whistle on us? We can't even get settled to find a score before either the mob or the law invites us to blow town. We might as well be on the lam. We party for a couple nights and word gets around that we're in town." He pointed to a gossip column in a tabloid. Take a look at this scandal sheet. The other four hoods leaned over the opened page.

"The influx of out-of-town nasties may well predict renewed violence in Uptown vice circles. Invited, or uninvited, five of Chicago's undesirables have been seen in bistros of the West Forties . . ." The column went on to name each member of the fugitive five.

"No gawdamn wonder Sammy doesn't want our trade here," Salaver grunted. "You can bet the law won't leave us alone for long." He turned to a hovering waiter. "Let's have the check."

"So what do we do?" Goddessa asked late that night when the five fugitives from their own reputations met in his Jersey motel unit.

Frank Salaver toyed with a can of beer and looked through the lowered venetian blinds. Without turning to look back at the other four, he came up with his answer. "I'm selling my car and getting out. The Illinois plates stand out even if the heap isn't known by now. And I'm going down to D.C. Once I get there, I'm laying low—no hot spots, no partying and no trying to learn from the local hoods what goes on. You can get across a state line in an hour down there in any direction and there's a lot of dough around Washington. I'm going to look for a nice fat payroll. I'll be at the Mariotto Motor Inn if any of you guys are interested. But just one thing, if you show down there, don't bring any heat along with you—no cars with Chicago tags, no dames and no trouble with the local law. Check into a suburban motel and play it quiet."

One by one, during the following week, the Chicago hoods drifted into the area surrounding Washington, D.C. Peter Kardagas checked into a Maryland motel just north of the D.C. line. Goddessa rented an apartment in Alexandria. Bake and Gordon moved into residential hotels in D.C. All five sold their cars and diligently played roles of conservative citizens. When they were together it was only behind closed doors and by pre-arrangement; never in any public place. Salaver's unit at the Mariotto became an unofficial headquarters where heavy patronage of the popular motor inn permitted them to come and go unnoticed. It was in this manner that Peter Kardagas arrived at the informal poker game where he liked what he saw and asked to be dealt in.

"Line up anything yet, Frankie?" he asked while dealing.

Salaver leafed an inch-deep stack of bills on the coffee table. "Want to play poker or talk business?" he answered with another question.

"Suit yourself, Frankie," Kardagas dealt.

"I'll open for five," Roughie Clarkson pushed a five dollar bill to the table center. "What about it, Frankie? Like Pete asked, you got anything lined up around here yet?"

Salaver made no reply. He studied his cards, threw in a bill and grunted, "I call."

Goddessa raised ten dollars and turned to Salaver, "So why don't you answer, Frankie? None of us came down here to play poker and hide in gawdamn motel rooms forever."

"I call the raise," Salaver said, "and raise you back a hundred."

Goddessa alone called and shrugged when Salaver turned over three aces and a pair of kings. "Well, what about it, Frankie?"

Salaver pushed the cards away and folded his wad of bills. "OK, you're all so anxious. I have something lined up but there's only room for three of us on the score. Who wants in and who wants out?"

"Into what, Frankie?" Clarkson asked.

"It's not that way on the heist, Roughie. If you're in, you know all about it. If you're out, you know nothing."

"We walk into a caper blind, on your say-so?" Bake asked.

"That's right, Gerry—on my say-so. If you're in, you're in all the way —for keeps—or you're not in at all."

"I'm not buying," Clarkson shrugged. "I like to know what I'm walking into before I make my bets."

"That goes for me too," Bake protested.

Salaver looked at Goddessa and Kardagas. "What about you people?" Before either man could answer, he turned to Bake and Clarkson. "Don't hang around. You had your chance. You're out. And don't slam the door."

Kardagas answered after the two men left: "Deal me in, Frankie."

"Me too," Goddessa joined him. "What's the score?"

"This spot—right here," Salaver grinned. "The office pete here is loaded every weekend. The people who run this spot have a couple others going for themselves and also a bar and lounge. The Friday night, Saturday and Sunday take from all the spots is brought here for banking on Monday mornings. But next Monday is a holiday. That means there'll be a four-day take ready for snatching. Four days' take from three motels, a bar and a lounge can add up to a bank-sized score. Split three ways, it's worth while."

"I'm listening," Kardagas agreed. "What's the office set up?"

"From the outside, it can't be touched. From in here, it's a dead, mortal cinch." Salaver walked to the unit window and spread the venetian blind slats. "See the office down there—by the pool?"

"The flat roof?" Goddessa asked.

"That's right, with the flat roof and the open court yard," Salaver let the blind slat snap back into place. "I've been in the lobby a dozen times and the office is well watched, guarded and protected. The front desk staff, bellmen, porters and clerks are too much for a heist team to get in and out without a rumble. But office windows lead on to a private courtyard and patio, walled in on four sides by the office and private suites of the owners. We walk across that roof from here; drop down into the courtyard; and through French windows of the office to the safe. After dark we can get across that roof without being seen. The night auditor starts to check cash at three in the morning. He's alone with the lobby door locked until he finishes and closes the safe. Like it?"

"I like it," Goddessa grinned.

"But why three men?" Kardagas asked.

"I've got to check out before we take that night auditor. And I can't show in the office. I've had coffee a few times with him in the restaurant at night. He knows me and he knows my voice. That's how I got on to his routine. When you check out here after midnight the unit isn't made up by the maids 'til the next morning."

"So if you check out, how do we get from this room to the office roof?" Goddessa looked at him.

"You stay here, after I check out. One of you remain up here just in case a house dick decides to check. I'll leave a couple bags for you to carry out the swag. I wait in a car for you. You can get out of this unit without going through the lobby. Buy it?"

"OK by me," Goddessa shrugged.

"We cut the cards for who goes in the office," Kardagas suggested as he began to shuffle the deck. "Cut?"

"Deal out two hands," Goddessa laughed. "Low man wins."

Kardagas dealt and looked down at the cards. He had dealt himself a spade flush and Goddessa a pair of deuces. "You hit the office, Bobbie. I'll back you up here. Right?"

"Right, Pete."

Kardagas turned to Salaver. "We-'ll stay away from here. See you Monday night."

"Make it early, Pete, before the crowd thins out at the bar downstairs. Just sort of drift in as if you're guests here. We'll go up to your unit at the Carousel to make the split. OK?"

"OK with me," Kardagas replied. "And we head in different directions after."

Kardagas and Goddessa were unnoticed in the holiday crowd at the Mariotto. Both men were in Salaver's unit before midnight and they casually spent the hours before the motel robbery playing five card stud. Occasionally Salaver walked to the unit window and peered through the venetian blinds at the office roof and motel driveway. Around one he walked to the lobby and paid his bill. "Want to get an early start on the road—long drive ahead today," he explained as the desk clerk handed him his receipt.

The clerk didn't even look up. "Have a good trip, sir," he answered as he turned to the night cash drawer. "Come back and see us again."

At three-thirty, Salaver moved quietly from his unit to a rented car, parked in the shadows near the Mariotto entrance, away from the Neon glare. "Watch the back of the car," he warned Kardagas. "If I see any kind of a rumble, I'll flash the stop lights. Bobbie can see up here from the office courtyard windows. Flip the room lights off and on if I warn you. And if any nosey house dick tries to bust in the unit while Bobbie is in the office, take care of him. And don't leave your gawdamn fingerprints around here, not even on a doorknob. See you in the car. Play fast, Bobbie." Salaver left the unit.

The surprised night auditor never knew what hit him. Goddessa dropped in shoeless feet from the low roof of the motel office to its darkened courtyard and entered the office through an opened French window. He came down fiercely on the motel employe's head with the butt of his .38 and followed up the blow with an unneeded choking arm lock. The auditor died with a gasp as Goddessa let his body sag in the desk chair. Stacks of bills spread over the desk and lining the open safe's interior interested Goddessa more than the fate of his victim. He crammed them in pillow cases in frantic, hurried, sweeping movements and saw that he couldn't clean out the safe in one trip. He checked the office door, slowly and silently and moved back to the courtyard, up to and across the roof. "Dump these in the bags and throw them back. There's more. I gotta make another trip."

"Make it fast," Kardagas whispered. "Things are cool here."

Goddessa crossed the roof in a crouch and looked into the office before he softly jumped down into the courtyard. He saw the dead auditor and the open safe. The office was undisturbed. In seconds he had cleaned out the safe of its remaining currency and was back up on the roof. He and Kardagas walked quietly from the unit to Salaver's car, carrying two Gladstone bags as normally as any two early-departing guests would do. Goddessa made the only comment just before they reached the sedan. "It was perfect!" He reached for the door handle and stopped. But he was too late. The door opened.

Handicapped by the currency-weighted Gladstone bags, neither Goddessa nor Kardagas had a chance to defend themselves in the onslaught of baseball bats swung by Bake and Gordon. They went down on the asphalt drive and were dragged into the rear seat with no more noise than the thuds of Louisville sluggers on their heads. When Salaver's rented sedan was driven from the Mariotto driveway, its rear seat contained the unconscious bodies of Salaver, Goddessa and Kardagas—and the two bags containing the swag.

"Keep an eye on them, Gerry," Clarkson said. "One of them might come to." He drove carefully, wary of a traffic violation in the well policed area of suburban Washington, D.C. "I'll pull off on the first side road. Frisk them and then throw that car rug over them. Some snoopy truck driver might look down and see what we're carrying."

"Just drive and don't worry about them coming to." Bake scattered the car rug over the bodies and then climbed into the back seat himself, sprawling out as if he were a sleeping passenger in a partially filled rear seat. 'If one moves, I'll feel his movement and clobber him back to sleep. You remember where we parked your car?"

"In the woods back of Falls Church. I know the road, first turn left past the service station."

"Just take it easy and watch for cruisers. I don't think this sedan's hot. Salaver was too smart to plan on driving a hot car or one with known plates all the way up to Maryland," Bake laughed.

"He wasn't smart enough to know you and I were listening outside his door that day when he laid out this caper," Clarkson growled.

"So he set himself, Bobbie and Pete up for a made-to-order hijacking. Just drive and watch for the law. Even smart hijackers can make mistakes."

Clarkson turned off Route 50 at the Falls Church side road and followed the narrowing road through the silvery morning haze into the Virginia hills. He pulled up on a tree shrouded rise where a green Chev was parked. "So far so good.

Let's get them out. I'll move these bags to the Chev." He opened one of the Gladstones and whistled when its top sprung open, pressured by the packs of green currency jammed inside. "Jackpot!" he exclaimed.

"Don't waste time admiring the merchandise, Roughie," Bake whispered coarsely. "Help me with these stiffs."

And Peter Kardagas was a "stiff". From the skull shattered blow of the hardball bat, from shock, or from a cardiac failure, he had died.

"Now what the hell do we do?" Bake snarled. "This sonuvabitch is dead. Do we bury him?"

Clarkson looked at the other two bruised and battered bodies of Salaver and Goddessa. "Put those crazy handcuffs back in your pocket." He pulled the bodies into a thicket and trampled the grass and weeds. "Batter them up a little more. Make it look like it was a Pier 6 brawl right out here. And wipe off those bats. Make sure you get the fingerprints off. When they're found it will look like they made some kind of a meet out here and got into an argument. When the law finds one of them dead, Salaver or Goddessa can toss a coin to see who rides the beef. Or they can dream up a story of their own. When I back out of here get a limb of that dead pine and rub hell out of the tracks. Then get in Salaver's sedan and run it back and forth. Get every trace of the Chev and our own tracks well cluttered up. Make so many tire tracks with that sedan that this thicket will look like the Mariotto parking lot. Don't forget to get your prints off that sedan," he screamed as Bake began to run it back and forth and around the clearing. "You're covering up what could be a murder beef!"

Bake carefully jumped from rocky patch to rocky patch on his way back down to the green Chev which Clarkson had backed to the road. "Let's get the hell out of here and back to D.C.," he grumbled.

"Be cool, be cool, Gerry. We got the dough, haven't we. So Kardagas flaked out. He dealt himself in this deal. Anyway, we'll be on a plane to the West Coast this afternoon." Clarkson drove carefully and found himself one of the thousands of early morning drivers caught up in the Washington-bound traffic from Virginia suburbs. He cursed. Bake slept.

"Just a routine check, sir," the Virginia State Trooper explained. "May I see your license?"

But it wasn't a routine check. The slain night auditor's body had been discovered and the motel robbery reported. Authorities were looking for the "J. J. Standard" who had checked out of the Mariotto. They had no clue other than his description and the motel staff's opinion that he was from the Midwest. The trooper had no specifics, only an early alarm of the murder-robbery and a warning to be on the

lookout for suspicious characters. When he saw Clarkson's Illinois driving permit and the Washington U-Drive rental contract, he asked Clarkson to pull out of the traffic line. He signalled to other troopers at the road block and they converged on the green Chev before either Bake or Clarkson could think of escaping or see a necessity to escape.

Hours after the two men were taken into custody, the trooper laughed at the small clue which triggered a more intensive questioning of Bake and Clarkson on the roadside. "I was ready to let them pull back on to Route 50 and go on in to the city when I noticed their heavy beards. They hadn't shaved for at least 24 hours. Clarkson said he was a salesman on his way to make calls on customers in the city. I never saw a salesman ready to make calls with a day-old beard. We frisked them and turned up the automatics. That was enough to hold them. When we opened the trunk and found those two bags of loot from the Mariotto, we knew we had our bandits for that motel job."

The humorously paradoxical ending to the botched hold-up didn't end when Clarkson and Bake were held for investigation of the motel murder-robbery. When their identification was established through fingerprints, the Chicago police advised, "BAKE AND CLARKSON KNOWN TO HAVE LEFT CHICAGO IN COMPANY OF FRANK SALAVER, ROBERT GODDESSA AND PETER KARDAGAS. . . ."

Salaver's description accurately fitted that of the guest who had departed, apparently, just before the Mariotto auditor was slain. And Goddessa had left track after track from the departed guest's unit on the motel office roof. Fast working and cooperating police forces in the eastern Virginia area, tipped off by a Falls Church resident who had been puzzled when he spotted Bake running the sedan back and forth to cover up tracks in the side road clearing, rapidly had the other three Chicago hoods—one dead—in custody. They were helped in sorting out the dual murder and robbery crimes when Bake and Clarkson blew their tops in a detention cell bugged to a tape recorder.

"So they find those two bags of greenbacks from the Mariotto score in our car trunk and lay a murder charge against us," Clarkson screamed at Bake. "You mean to tell me you were casing that lobby outside and didn't hear a shot fired while I watched Frankie's sedan in the office?"

"Take it easy, Roughie. How do we know Bobbie shot the guy?"

"They got us charged with murder haven't they?"

"Does that mean he was shot?"

"You know any other way Goddessa works?"

"Don't shout at me, Roughie!

They'll hear you across the Potomac!"

"Who's shouting? A gawdamn murder beef that we don't know anything about!"

"And two bags of dough that make up the kind of circumstantial evidence that a green assistant D.A. could frame us with!"

Clarkson cursed. "Like you said, Gerry, 'even smart hijackers can make mistakes'."

"We're not beat yet, Roughie. Just keep your mouth shut and a smart mouthpiece can get us off the hook."

"Off the hook on the motel score we didn't make, maybe," Clarkson growled back at Bake, "but how long do you think it'll be before they find Pete's body out behind Falls Church? You know damn well they'll peg us for that one. Why did you have to hit Kardagas so damn hard with that bat?"

"I didn't hit him any harder than I did the other two. And you slugged him too. Remember? Maybe it was your crack that got him!"

"Aw, what the hell, he had a thin skull anyway," Clarkson snarled. "Remember? He was the guy that knocked on the door that day and liked what he saw. Remember what he said? 'Deal me in!' So he got dealt in."

When the tape recording was played back to Bake and Clarkson, and when they were faced with Salaver and Goddessa—with the grill of a detention cell between the surviving pairs—Roughie Clarkson concluded an orgiastic stream of curses with a philosophical curse, "Death sure dealt those gawdamn cards!"

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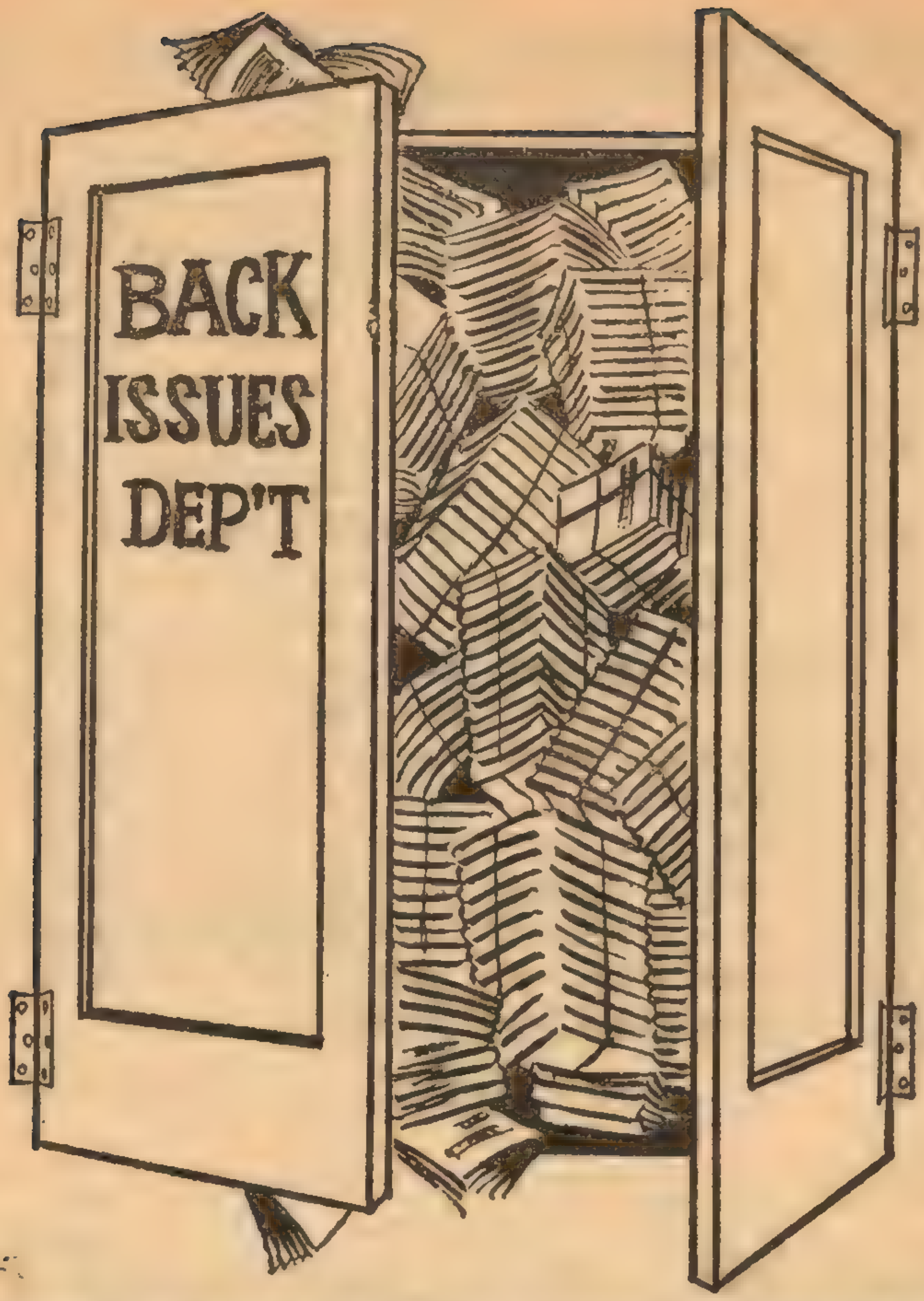

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VIRTUE'S PRIZE

BY H. RAYBURN

"It's like the humans versus the animals . . . and I took sides with the humans."

It was supposed to have been a quiet Sunday spent in getting some office accounts up to date in the comfort of my living room. But I had barely begun when screams from outside drew me to the window. I expected to see some noisy kids. Instead a girl was running down the center of the street followed closely by a man swearing and swinging his arms in rage. Obviously he had gotten ahold of her at least once, because what remained of her blouse hung in tatters from her skirt and, in effect, left her with little more than a brassiere.

She screamed again, but the two dozen or so people on the sidewalks either stood curiously watching or stared intently in front of them, pretending that nothing really unusual was happening. I gaped for a second and was filled with an intense dislike for the good citizens who wouldn't raise a finger to help the girl.

My apartment was only on the second floor, so I ran out the door and down the hall to the stairs. With my foot poised in the air to take the first step, I was startled to see the screaming girl practically fly up and dash by me. She had ap-

parently felt that her chances in an apartment house were better than on the indifferent street. The wild man pursuing her didn't give me much chance for reflection, because as soon as the girl rushed past he came bounding up the stairs, three at a time, yelling, "I'll get you, you bitch! I'll break your face up!" His lips curled back over his teeth and his face was red and mottled. He seemed to be about my height, but thinner, so I was pretty sure I could hold him off until the girl could get away.

But I spent an extra fraction of a second thinking and his shoulder slammed into my chest as he rounded the corner at the top step. I was knocked back against the wall, and he seemed to do a little dance to hold his balance. In a second he was after the girl again but I was right behind him. Just at my open apartment door I grabbed at him, tugged, and found myself sprawling on the floor with a small rag of checkered shirt in my hand. It briefly crossed my mind that Humphry Bogart did this sort of thing with much more finesse, let alone success.

My eyes were out of focus as I jumped to my feet and for a helpless second or so I wobbled, fully expecting to be kicked in the stomach or something. A few blinks took away the blur and I was pleasantly surprised to see the man sitting in front of me holding a hand to his bleeding nose. He fell too and must have hit his face hard against the floor or the wall.

Meanwhile, the girl, who had rushed into my apartment, showed up in the doorway brandishing a long carving knife. I took two quick steps and wrapped my hand around her wrist.

She looked at me with wide, fearful eyes and said, "He . . . he'll kill me."

"Listen, you're all right now. Don't you kill *him*."

At the sight of the knife he came to his feet and backed off. "I'll get you another time, bitch." Then he fixed his eyes on me and said, "And you too, buddy. I'll get you but good. I know where *you* live." He glanced into my apartment then stalked off with blood still gushing from his nose.

The girl's crying interrupted my consideration of his threat. I took her into the apartment, closed the door, and sat her down on the couch. After returning the knife to its place in the kitchen, I poured us both a drink and joined her.

"Try this," I suggested, handing her a glass. "It'll make you feel better than crying."

In a few seconds she stifled her sobs, and we both borrowed fortitude from a couple of double scotches. She leaned her head back against the couch and closed her eyes to compose herself. Even though I was shaky and beginning to feel little pains from being bounced into a wall and a floor,

I could still appreciate a sexy looking girl. Her black hair, though mussed, was long and silky, providing a lovely background for her white, full-lipped face. Exposed because of the torn blouse, her large brassiere was doing full service; even leaning back she had a deep cleavage.

She opened her eyes and caught me staring at her then crossed her arms—slowly—in front of her chest.

"Sorry for staring," I said. "You're very attractive."

A corner of her mouth tilted upward. "Do you have something I could wear home?"

I went to the bedroom and brought her a sportshirt that had shrunk in the wash. It wasn't a bad fit as her breasts were able to take up a considerable amount of the slack.

"Who was that guy chasing you?" I asked.

She tensely intertwined her fingers. "An ex-boyfriend."

"He looked awfully mean."

"He wanted to beat me up."

"Why?"

"I stopped seeing him last week. We were going around together. I mean we were even talking about getting married. I found out he was mixed up with stolen cars . . . and other things. I knew he had a police record but he told me he was going legitimate. When I found out he was lying I broke off with him."

"Anything more? That doesn't seem enough to make him chase you like a *mad*man."

She rubbed a hand over her eyes. "He has a bad temper."

I lit a cigarette and my hands were still a little unsteady. "That's like saying a rabid dog is slightly irritable."

"I moved to a new apartment. I didn't tell him where; I didn't want him to be able to find me."

"Apparently he did."

"I had forgotten something in the closet of my old apartment and went to get it. He was waiting in front in his car. We had a terrible argument."

"And then he tore your blouse?" I asked.

Her eyes brimmed with tears again. "Yes . . . after he knocked me down. . . . I ran for a block before I came in here."

I said, "Well, he still doesn't know where you live. If you switch jobs and get an unlisted phone he shouldn't be able to find you."

And then I realized with a sick clarity that he knew where I lived, had made a pretty direct threat, and was a hood who evidently took revenge seriously. I already had my share of worries from reading the newspapers and I sure wasn't interested in lying awake at night listening for creaks from the living room floor.

I walked to the phone and picked up the receiver.

"What are you doing?" the girl asked worriedly.

"Calling the police. Let *them* handle that guy. He's a menace."

She stood up and shook her head. "No. This is my chance to get away from him for good."

"You're willing to let him get away with what he did?" I asked.

Her eyes hardened. "He's out of my life now. I don't want to get involved."

"Involved! I declared angrily. "Your face is in one piece and you're rid of him because I got involved. Now *he's* out to get *me*! I didn't ignore you like those cowards on the street. I helped you. Now you can help me a little," I turned my back on her to make clear that there was nothing further to discuss. It took about twenty seconds to get properly connected with the police, and as I began to explain the situation I turned to face her . . . but she was gone. The desk sergeant helloed me about five times before I could respond. Of course, there was not much the police could do without any identification of the girl or her ex-boyfriend. They only promised to keep a close eye on my apartment house for loiterers or anything unusual.

After hanging up I downed another shot of scotch and tried to remember the judo I had learned in the marines.

The next day, Monday, I awoke with a terrible headache. I dressed, had some coffee and aspirin for breakfast, and went sleepy-eyed to my car, which I kept parked on the street. I tossed my briefcase full of unfinished work in the back seat then sat down at the wheel and inserted the key in the the ignition. But before turning the engine over I decided to play it cautious. I got out and walked around to the trunk, feeling that a jack handle might be a comforting friend to have handy on the front seat.

As I slipped the trunk key in the lock my eyes focused on the ground underneath the bumper. I saw a small heap of white particles contrasting against the black asphalt. I curiously stooped down, and a shock of dismay settled in my stomach as I discovered that the white particles were sugar and directly under my gasoline cap. I unscrewed the cap and ran my finger around the inside of the pipe that led to the tank. There were particles of sugar there also. With a sigh I straightened and trudged back to my apartment to call for a tow truck and get a garage appointment.

I felt more relief than anger. I *could* have started the car and destroyed the engine with sugar. But with the fortunate discovery, I'd just need the gas tank cleaned out. The garage manager said they were pretty busy and wouldn't have the car ready until Tuesday, so I said O.K. and took public transportation to work.

My big consoling thought was that the wildman had had his re-

venge and I could stop worrying about what he planned to do. Still, I viewed having gotten involved with some regret. I didn't wish that I hadn't helped the girl but rather that someone else had beaten me to it.

With my mind clear of worry I was able to put in a good day's work on Monday and on Tuesday. In fact, I worked late Tuesday and it was dark when I headed for the subway to pick up my car at the garage.

It was then that I discovered I was foolish to have stopped worrying and had underestimated the ex-boyfriend's capacity for revenge.

As I was walking to the subway I passed three men in a darkened doorway. Although I gave them only a brief glance, one of them seemed vaguely familiar. I figured my imagination was playing tricks with me until I caught their reflection in an angled store window. Having left the doorway they were about fifteen yards behind me and walking in the same direction. The one in the middle was built just like the man I had decided was no longer out to get me. I couldn't be sure, of course, but it was no situation to gamble on.

The subway entrance was a block and a half in front of me. There were scattered people on the sidewalk, but remembering how the good folks acted when the girl was being chased, I dismissed their presence as not much comfort.

The footsteps of the three men became louder as they closed the distance between us. I bolted and began to sprint, reasoning that if I was wrong about them I would only be some nut with a briefcase who was losing his dignity. But if I was right and held the dignity I'd be losing teeth.

They chased me.

As I sped across the street, I glanced back and saw them some twenty yards away, my running apparently having surprised them. But one of them was pulling ahead and my heavy briefcase felt like an anchor. By the time I reached the subway steps the closest pursuer couldn't have been more than ten feet away.

I ran headlong down the stirs, stumbling once, almost falling, and skipping three steps in the process. My lungs began to ache and a stitch in my side felt like muscles were being torn. With more desperation than skill I vaulted over the turnstile, twisted my ankle, and found my direction reversed as I shuffled to maintain my balance. The man after me, a big, beefy redhead who looked like he could carry a brewery keg in each hand, paused at the turnstile then put one foot on it to jump over. Instinctively, I grabbed the briefcase handle with both hands and swung the briefcase around and at him as he jumped down from the turnstile.

The metal edge of the heavy case caught him in the mouth and

slammed his head back as his feet went out from under him. I saw blood and two teeth fly from his face but didn't wait for him to hit the ground, as his buddies had reached the turnstile. I hobbled fifty feet to a train and leaped in as the doors were closing. Looking through the glass in the door I observed the hood who had instigated the chase bending over the flattened red-head while the other man stood and shook his fist at me.

From the garage I drove to the police station and gave them the latest information, including as clear a description of the men as I could remember. A lieutenant promised to keep my apartment house under close surveillance for about a week but expressed his doubts that any of the men would take a chance and show up, as they would expect the police to be waiting for them.

None too heartened I drove home, ate a tasteless dinner, and began to consider what I might do to protect myself.

A knock on the door startled me from my thoughts. Expecting anything I took the carving knife from the kitchen and brought it to the door. "Who's there?" I said.

"Me," a feminine voice answered.

"Are you alone?" I had no idea who it was.

"Yes."

I took a firm grip on the knife and cautiously opened the door.

Standing there was the girl who was responsible for my whole predicament. I couldn't believe she had actually come back and I just stood there, open-mouthed, staring at her.

Smiling, she pointed at the knife. "Is that the one you took away from me?"

"What? . . . Oh, yes. Yes." I tossed it on a table. "Come in."

She walked in, closed the door behind her, and handed me my sportshirt. "Here. I thought I should give this back and thank you for your help."

I took the shirt and grinned widely. I felt considerable relief knowing I'd be able to get the wild man's identification. "I've had a couple of unhappy run-ins with your ex-boyfriend."

She glanced at the floor and said, "I've felt pretty bad about not showing appreciation for what you did for me."

"I was beginning to feel very sorry I got involved."

She looked up and her eyes roamed about my well furnished apartment. "When you were looking at me when my blouse was ripped I was flattered. I mean you're a good looking guy and I can tell you must have a good job from your apartment and all. All my boyfriends were bums. I mean nobody decent was ever interested in me."

I was a bit puzzled as to what she was driving at, but it was hard to

pay close attention because her pretty face and perfect figure kept intruding on my thoughts. If she were making some kind of pass, I was sure willing, but I did want to give the police some names first.

"Listen," I said, "your ex-boyfriend has a couple of friends. One of them has red hair and looks like a fullback, and the other is a short, dark man—I think he has long sideburns. It'd be a real help if you could give me their names too."

Her tongue flicked nervously at her lips. "I think I could really show you my appreciation. I mean we'd have to get to know each other a bit first."

Provocatively she pretended to pick a piece of lint from where her breast jutted at her blouse. Her finger slowly circled the area of her nipple.

I put my hand on her shoulder, hoping to get her on the same frequency as mine. "The names. I need the names. Without them you may have to get to know me in a hospital."

She turned her head from me and I realized she hadn't looked directly in my eyes once. "I thought you were a decent guy. I thought I should show you my appreciation. That's why I came back."

I felt a sudden dryness in my mouth. "You're not going to give me the names, is that it?"

Still turned away she replied, "You helped me get away from him. I don't want anything to do with him anymore. And I don't want anything to do with the police. I'm afraid."

I shot back angrily, "So you won't do the one thing that can *really* help me! But you think a little sex can buy off your conscience."

Her voice cracked as she said, "I'm lonely. I need to have a boyfriend. I thought you were a decent guy."

"I am, honey! That's my problem. I should have let that maniac bash your face in."

She began to quietly sob, but I felt no softness toward her. I was as disgusted as I had been with the people who had stood by and watched her run helplessly down the street. In fact, I had a sudden awareness of those people that I lacked before. They weren't cowards. They were just smart individuals who knew enough to mind their own business. It took a fool like myself to voluntarily be a sacrificial lamb.

With the blood pounding in my ears, I yanked the door open, grabbed the girl by the arm, and shoved her in the hallway. "All right, honey, go home and be safe! You might be thankful that there was somebody stupid enough to get involved and save your neck. You're pretty lucky I didn't realize I was just ex*chan*ging necks. From now on I'm a spectator, just a quiet observer of the human scene."

Her tears were streaking mascara down her face. She opened her mouth to say something but I slammed the door on her.

Hating the whole world, myself included, I polished off half a bottle of scotch and fell asleep in a drunken stupor.

The next day I was miserable at the office because the hangover didn't leave me until late afternoon. In order to review some papers I had confused in the morning, I worked overtime again and left at about eight o'clock.

I wasn't really afraid anymore; I was angry. If those three hoods got to me, it would be at a price. I was already a fool but I'd be damned if I'd let them make me a quivering milquetoast.

With the jack handle on the front seat I pulled out of the building garage and began to drive home.

After about five blocks I became disturbed by the rearview mirror reflection of a car that had its lights on bright. My eyes were feeling none too well from the hangover, so I slowed down for the car to pass. It didn't. Then I sped up, hoping to outdistance it, but it remained steadily on my tail.

To be certain my mounting suspicion was correct, I drove around a block. The car followed all the way, and I placed my fingers on the cool metal of the jack handle for reassurance.

It would have been easy to have driven directly to a police station and shaken the car that way, but that would have just postponed our meeting. What I decided to do was somehow get the car to close in and take the license number. With a clue like that the police would probably be able to get to the men and put a stop to the whole ugly mess. Of course, the key problem was whether I could get away before they got *too* close.

I drove aimlessly in and out of streets while the car hung on like a poor relative. Even though I turned in my seat four or five times for a glimpse at the license number, I saw nothing but green spots because of the bright lights.

No sooner had I decided that the plan was hopeless than, in a quick burst of speed, the car pulled beside me and began to bang into my left fender. I gripped the steering wheel as hard as I could, not wanting to be caught on a dark, deserted street. There were bright lights a couple blocks ahead, and I felt if I could make it there I'd be okay.

But with a great crash their car angled into my fender again and pushed the torn metal against my tire. The blowout sounded like a small cannon going off and, out of control, the car leapt over the curb and grinded for a hundred feet against the side of a building. The noise was like a thousand pieces of chalk being pushed the wrong way against a blackboard.

Not too shaken up, but with my ears ringing, I grabbed the jack

handle, pushed the door open, and jumped out of the car.

The big redhead, probably infuriated from having tasted the edge of my briefcase, came running full tilt with his hand outstretched. I knew if I could get him just once on his already beaten up mouth I'd probably put him out of action. He was no more than six feet from me and coming fast when, with a stiff arm, I pointed the jack handle at his face. He ran right into it, the sharp end catching him on the lower jaw and then bouncing up to the roof of his mouth. With a horrible gagging noise he fell squirming to the ground and planted both hands on his face.

I backed against the building wall and watched the other two advance with much more caution. The short dark one crouched like a panther coming in for the kill and the ex-boy friend was working himself into the same kind of rage I had seen him display the other day. His lips were pulled back past his teeth and he was growling almost unintelligible curses.

The blood drained from my face when I saw that they both held knives. I pressed against the wall with a great desire to climb backwards up the building.

If they both came at me at the same time, I was done for, but fortunately the ex-boyfriend held back a bit, apparently waiting for his ugly partner to give him a safe opening.

The dark man lunged at my left side, his knife held straight out. As the blade ripped through my jacket, just missing my ribs, I brought the jack handle hard across his wrists. He dropped the knife, but in falling against me impeded my bringing the jack handle around to defend myself against his buddy, who held *his* knife low and was ready to rip it upward into my groin.

I jerked my leg up to protect myself and the knife sunk painfully into the underside of my thigh. He pulled the knife out and held it over his head, trying to decide where the most suitable target would be. There was not much I could do because the dark man was wrestling with my arm and keeping the jack handle out of action.

My eyes were fixed on the knife held in deadly poise in the air, but seconds passed and it didn't plunge downward. I reoriented my focus and was startled to see an arm around the ex-boyfriend's throat and a hand restraining his upheld wrist. The realization that someone had come to help gave me the spurt of strength needed to yank the jack handle away from the dark man. I cracked it onto his head twice and he sank to the ground. When I looked up I saw the ex-boyfriend being propelled into the building by the man behind him. It only took one good thunk for the wildman to collapse into unconsciousness.

Dizzily, I hobbled to the curb,

sat down, and clutched my wounded thigh.

"There'll be a patrol car here soon," the man said. "I sent a friend to call one when I came over to help."

"You probably saved my life," I said weakly. "I can't thank you enough."

He sat down next to me on the curb. He was much bigger than I was. "You would've probably done the same thing."

I shook my head. "I don't know. I had sort of changed my mind the last couple of days about getting mixed up in other people's troubles." I looked at him. He had an average face. Rather gentle, in fact. "You could have gotten killed. Why did you get involved?"

He shrugged. "I was involved before I met you. We're human beings. I mean if we can't help each other what have we got? It's like the humans versus the animals I took sides with the humans."

"A knife in your gut would've been a high price to pay."

"Good things cost."

The sound of a distant police siren began to increase in volume. Feeling very weak I lay back on the sidewalk.

The blinking red lights came speeding down the street and I closed my eyes. I had a lot to think about.

CLEAN-UP

The ice-pick specialist was dead. But he'd just been a small cog in a big wheel. Liddell wanted the whole machine!

A

MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY

FRANK KANE

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JOHNNY LIDDELL pushed open the ground-glass door that bore the legend, "Johnny Liddell, Private Investigations" and slammed it after him. His red-headed secretary sat in a railing enclosed space, stabbing listlessly at the keys of a desk typewriter, taking excessive care not to fracture the finish on her carefully shellacked nails.

"Hello, Pinky," he greeted her. "Anybody to see me?"

The redhead stopped jabbing at the typewriter, turned a pair of sea green eyes toward him. "Some character named Marty Sommers. I put him in the inside office. I was afraid some of our respectable clients might see him." She looked him over, sniffed. "From what the papers said I expected to see you in bits."

"Don't believe everything you read in the papers."

The redhead extracted a clipping from the morning paper. "I saved the blow-by-blow description for your scrapbook."

Liddell grunted, waved the clipping aside. "I don't have to read about it. I was there." He pushed through the railing gate, headed for the inside office.

"How about Seaway Indemnity? Do we bill them for the job?"

Liddell stopped with his hand on the knob. "Isn't it customary to wait until a job's finished before we bill?"

The redhead's eyes widened. "You mean it isn't finished? Seaway hired you to find out who killed Barney Shields. The killer is on a slab in the morgue and the gal that fingered Barney for the kill is in the ladies' section of the same. What more do you want?"

"I want the big boys who let out the kill contract. Don't forget that the pineapple that blew Lois Turner loose from her falsies was meant for me. Things like that hurt my feelings."

"I'd rather get my feelings hurt than get my head blown off,"

Pinky retorted. "Those boys play for keeps. Next time, you might not find a stand-in."

"Very encouraging," Liddell nodded. "Just the same, I intend to finish the job Barney Shields started out to do."

"It's your skin, if you like to wear it with holes in it." The red-head sniffed audibly, went back to stabbing at the typewriter keys. Then, as Liddell closed his office door after him, she tore the half-finished page from the typewriter, crushed it irritably and threw it at the waste basket.

Inside the private office, a man sat in the clients' chair, puffing nervously on a butt. He looked up as Liddell walked in, grinned feebly. He was tall, gangling. His arms hung out of the sleeves of his jacket, his neck was long, heavily corded. He was deeply tanned and, as he grinned, muscles cut deep furrows in the mahogany of his skin.

Liddell walked over, jabbed a hand at him, got a firm handshake in return. "You're Marty Sommers?"

The thin man nodded. "I got word from friends you wanted to see me." He dug into his pocket, brought out a fresh cigarette, chain-lit it from the butt he held cupped in his hand. "My friends said I could trust you."

"Thanks." Liddell walked around the desk, dropped into his chair. "You read about Barney Shields being killed?"

Sommers took a deep drag on his cigarette, blew a stream of smoke at the glowing end. "He was a fink planted on the docks?"

"An insurance investigator. Worked for Seaway Indemnity. He was murdered because he knew too much. I'm taking on where he left off."

"That's a big job." The thin man returned the butt to the corner of his mouth, looked up at Liddell. "What made you send for me?"

"I thought you might help."

"Why should I?"

Liddell shrugged, opened his bottom drawer, dug out a fifth of bourbon and two paper glasses. "Because you always fought for a decent break for the men on the docks. We're fighting the same men—the racketeers that have moved in and taken over." He poured some bourbon into each of the cups, handed one to the thin man.

"Sure. I always fought the meatballs and the goons. And what'd it get me?" He leaned forward. "You know what I got to do to make a living? I got to sell papers, hustle packages, do anything but the thing I know how to do—work the docks." He sank back in his chair. "I'm blacklisted on the docks. I could turn out to a shape-up from now to Hell freezes over, but I couldn't get a day's work. Now or ever."

Liddell took a sip of his bour-

bon. "They can stop you from working just like that. They take the bread out of your family's mouth, and you won't fight back?"

"Maybe I'm tired of fighting, mister. Maybe you can't buck the system. Maybe I should have been like the other boys—stuck a toothpick behind my ear to let the shape-up boss know I was willing to kick back half my pay to get a day's work." He drained his glass, crushed it into a ball, threw it at the wastebasket. "It's a lot of maybes."

"But you came up here just the same."

"I guess I was just curious, Liddell." He shrugged. "I wouldn't be any use to anybody in a fight. They ground it out of me. They ground it out of all of us. Some of us ended up in the river, others ended up like me. The rest got the idea."

"Who's the big man behind the boys on the piers?"

"You kidding?"

Liddell shook his head. "I'm starting on this job from scratch, Sommers. The two men who could have helped me are dead." He finished his drink, set the cup back on the desk. "What do you know about an icepick artist named Denver?"

"He was sergeant at arms in the pier local," the thin man told him in a tight voice. "He used that sticker of his to make a guy think twice before asking questions. Lou Panzer asked too many questions one night and ended up on Staten Island with more holes in his chest than a pin cushion."

"Who did Denver work for?"

Sommers wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Tony Marko. He's head of the pier local. They call him the business agent." He watched while Liddell dug another cup out of the drawer, spilled some bourbon into it. "I want to help, Liddell, but I got a family I got to think of."

"I'll cover you," Liddell promised. "Help me, and maybe that family of yours can start living again." He handed over the bourbon. "Somebody's got to go up against these boys, but I can't do it blind."

Sommers bit at his lower lip, nodded. "I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"Good." Liddell added some bourbon to his cup, leaned back. "This business agent—what's his graft?"

"Short ganging. Hiring sixteen men and turning in a payroll for twenty-two. Making every man who does a day's work kick back fifteen percent out of his day's pay. Every dirty little racket you can think of."

Liddell swirled the liquor around in his cup, shook his head. "That's not what Shields stumbled on. It was something bigger. Much bigger." He sipped at his drink. "Something affecting his

company, something to do with looting cargo. How about that?"

Sommers shook his head. "That's big stuff. The local wouldn't be behind that, Liddell. That would come from the big guys, not the meatballs."

"Much of it go on?"

The thin man laughed grimly. "Plenty. I've heard of whole shipments disappearing. Trucks back up and cart the stuff away. That's the big guys' personal graft."

"Barney Shields stumbled on something so big they had to kill him to shut him up. Got any idea of what it might be?"

Sommers considered it, shook his head. "It could be anything." He stared at Liddell for a minute." "I read in the papers it was Denver that killed your friend. To me, that means the local. Denver did the dirty work for the local, not for the big guys."

"This business agent for the local. This Tony Marko. Where would I be likely to find him?"

The thin man consulted his wristwatch. "He'll be down at the pier for the shape-up, pointing out the men who'll work. After that, he usually drops by the Harbor Cafe with one of his meatballs and waits for his kickbacks from them."

Liddell drained his cup, dropped it in the wastebasket. "I think maybe I ought to have a talk with this Tony Marko. He sounds interesting."

"Maybe I ought to go along with you and point him out."

Liddell grinned at him. "I thought you wanted to keep out of this."

"That's what I thought too, Liddell. But I just realized this is my fight more than it is yours, and for the first time it looks as though I've got a chance."

The Harbor Cafe was a grimy, brick fronted two story building set in the shadows of the Brooklyn Bridge, within smelling distance of the Fulton Fish Market. Across the slip, South Street was lined with ships of all nations tied up at docks that ran as far as the eye could see. The interior was dim and cool.

Johnny Liddell sat at a table in the rear with Sommers, signalled to the bartender for two drinks, settled back to wait. He was on his second drink and fourth cigarette when the bartender began to whistle a popular tune.

Sommers got up. "It's Marko coming. I'd better not be sitting with you when he comes in." He scuttled to the bar with his drink, crouched over it. After a moment, two men entered, looked around.

One of them, fat, coatless, with dark halfmoons of sweat under his armpits, jabbed a thick finger at Sommers. "I told you to stay off the waterfront, didn't I?" His voice was deep, coarse. "This is your last warning. Get out."

Sommers nodded, circled around them, disappeared through the open door. The fat man's eyes roamed around the bar, stopped at Liddell. "Who's he?" he asked the bartender.

The man behind the bar shrugged. "Dropped in for a drink."

"Get him out. We got some business to do in here."

Liddell swung around in his chair, stared at the big man. Layers of fat had piled on what had once been a mass of muscle. Damp, wet hair was pasted down over his forehead. His eyes were little black discs set behind discolored mounds of flesh.

"I'll have another bourbon, bartender," Liddell said.

The fat man blew bubbles in the center of his mouth. "Throw him out, Condon," he told the man with him.

Condon was red-headed, about twenty-seven. His shoulders sloped and his arms dangled like an ape's. The scar tissue over his right eye almost closed it. It didn't strain Liddell's deductive powers to place him as a professional slugger. He swaggered over to where the private detective sat. "You heard the man. He don't want you around." His lips pulled back from the stubs of his teeth. "Do you get out or do I throw you out?"

Liddell looked up at him, calmly raised his glass to his lips.

The redhead knocked the glass from Liddell's hand with a swipe of his meaty hand, caught him by the shoulder, dragged him to his feet. "You want it the hard way, sucker?" He threw a ham-like fist at Liddell's head, grunted when it went over the private detective's shoulder.

Liddell brought a stiff right up from his ankle. The redhead fielded it with the pit of his stomach, went to his knees, his eyes rolling back in his head. Liddell brought his knee up, caught the redhead under the chin, snapped his head back. Condon toppled over on his back and didn't move.

"That meatball was all soft inside. How about you, fat boy?" Liddell asked softly.

The pier boss snarled at him, started toward him. His hand disappeared under his coat, came out with a knife. He held it low, blade slanting upward in the manner of an experienced knife fighter. "Let's see what you look like inside."

Suddenly, he froze in his tracks when he saw the .45 that had appeared in Liddell's hand. The little black eyes receded behind their discolored buttresses, he licked at his lips. The eyes fell to the muzzle of the .45. "Who are you, anyway?" he growled.

"My name's Liddell."

The little eyes snapped up to the private detective's face. "I heard a lot about you. I know a lot of guys who'd like to meet you."

"You met me. It didn't do you much good." Liddell walked over to where the fat man stood, brought the barrel of the .45 down on his knife hand with shattering force.

Marko roared his pain, dropped the knife to the floor. He started to spew curses at Liddell, bubbles forming and bursting between his lips. Liddell brought the barrel of the gun back, slammed it across the fat man's mouth. It drove him back, knocking over a table and chair. He lay there breathing heavily, his pig-like eyes rimmed with fear. "What do you want?" The bubbles were pink-tinged now.

"A little conversation." Liddell reached down, pulled him to his feet. "We're walking out of here together. Be smart and you might get where we're going." He jabbed the muzzle of the .45 almost to the trigger guard in the fat man's belly. "Get any ideas and I'll splash you onto the slab next to your boy Denver."

The fat man wiped his lips with the back of his hand, stared at the red smear. "Where are we going?"

"You'll find out when we get there—if you get there." Liddell nodded toward the door. "Let's go, Marko."

South Street was deserted when they walked out into the blinding sunshine. Liddell walked to the left of the fat man, almost a step behind, his right hand buried to the wrist in his pocket. "There's a blue Buick parked down the street. We're using that. You'll drive."

The fat man looked around, his shoulders drooped as the fight seeped out of him. He walked down the street to where the Buick was parked, slid in behind the wheel, Liddell beside him. The .45 bored into the fat man's side.

"Where are we going?" he breathed noisily.

"Your place."

The fat man's face gleamed wetly. "My place?"

"It'll be the last place they'll think of looking when the meatball comes to life and finds out you've been snatched. I wouldn't want us to be interrupted."

"I don't live alone. I got a shack-up deal."

"I'm broadminded." He jabbed the gun deeper into the fat man's side, brought a gasp from the pouting lips. "I'll bet you're a real devil with the ladies. She'll leave us alone. Get the heap moving."

Marko kicked the motor to life, the big car rolled out into a thin stream of traffic, U-turned and headed for the East Side Drive. They left the drive at 63rd Street, headed east, pulled up in front of an apartment house on 65th Street.

"This is it," the fat man growled.

"What apartment?"

"Three C."

Liddell nodded. "We're going

up. Remember what I told you about ending up alongside Denver. One phony move and I'll spill you all over the place."

The fat man nodded. He led the way through a revolving door, across a small lobby to an automatic elevator. They rode to the third floor, walked down a carpeted hallway to a door marked 3C.

"Knock," Liddell told him.

The fat man pounded his knuckles against the door.

Inside, they could hear the tapping of high heels crossing the floor.

"Who is it?" a woman's voice wanted to know.

"Open up," Marko growled. "It's me. Marko."

The door swung open. A tall brunette in a thin negligee that left nothing to the imagination stood framed in the doorway. Her hazel eyes jumped from Marko to Liddell. "What is it, Marko?"

The fat man put the flat of his hand against the girl's shoulder, sent her reeling into the room. "You talk too much."

Liddell followed them into the living room, kicked the door shut behind him. He pulled the .45 from his pocket, let the girl see it. "Anybody else in the place?"

The girl made an ineffectual attempt to pull the negligee around her, shook her head. The blood had drained from her face, leaving it a transparent ivory, her make-up standing out like blotches on her skin. Her fist was clenched at her throat as though she were stifling a scream that was rising there.

"No noise, baby," Liddell told her. "Nobody's going to get hurt. The fat boy and I have some business. He's going to tie you up in the bedroom until we're finished."

A faint flush of color returned to the girl's face. "You going to let him push you around like that, Marko? You're always telling me how tough you are—"

The fat man lashed out, caught her across the cheek with the flat of his hand, knocked her backwards. For a moment, Liddell's eyes left the fat man. Marko moved with surprising speed for a man his size, pulled the girl between himself and Liddell's gun and threw her forward. The girl's body hit Liddell, knocking him momentarily off balance.

Marko was on top of him before he could get set, lashed out with his toe at Liddell's groin, missed by inches. The private detective chopped at the fat man's shin with the barrel of the .45, drew a yelp of pain. By the time the fat man got set again, the muzzle of the gun was staring at his midsection.

"You're pushing your luck, fat boy," Liddell grinned humorlessly.

The fat man hopped on one foot, clasped his shin between his hands. "Okay. I know when I'm licked."

The girl stared at him with un-

concealed contempt, her full lips drawn back from her teeth. "You won't have to tie me, mister," she told Liddell. "That fat slob didn't care if you shot me when he threw me at you. I hope you split his head open."

"I hope you get your hope, baby," Liddell told her. "Because if he doesn't open up, I'm going to open him up."

The brunette turned the full power of her eyes on Liddell, studied the heavy shoulders, the thick hair flecked with grey approvingly. The negligee had fallen open, and firm, tip-tilted breasts poked out. "I'll be in the bedroom," she told him. She turned, walked toward the bedroom door, her full, round hips working smoothly against the fragile fabric of the gown. She didn't look back as she shut the door behind her.

"Okay, tough guy. Now for the conversation." Liddell motioned the fat man to a chair, reached up, loosened his tie, opened his collar. "I want some answers. How I get them depends on you. Make it easy on yourself."

The fat man dropped into a chair, glared up at Liddell. "You're wasting your time."

"That's what makes horse-racing, Marko—a difference of opinion. Me, I think you're going to give singing lessons." When the fat man dropped his eyes to his lap, Liddell reached over, grabbed a hand full of his hair, yanked his head up. "What did Barney Shields find that made it necessary to kill him?"

The fat man managed a smile, but his eyes were shadowed with apprehension. "You ask him. I don't know how to work an ouija board."

Liddell brought his hand back, smashed the knuckles against the fat man's mouth, spilled a stream of blood down his chin. "Keep up the funny answers, Fatso, and I'll leave you as toothless as the day you were born."

The fat man squeezed back against the cushions. "I don't know anything about Shields."

"You're a liar. It was your boy that icepicked him. Why?"

The beady little eyes glared from behind their pouches. The fat man wiped his mouth on his sleeve, refused to answer.

Liddell's hand described a short arc, knocked the fat man's head sideways. "Be as stubborn as you like, Fatso. I've got all day." He slapped the head back into position. "You'll either talk to me, or never again."

"You scare me to death," the fat man blustered.

"I didn't scare Denver to death, but it's a cinch the .45 slugs I pumped into him didn't lengthen his life." He pointed the .45 at Marko's bulging waistline. "Maybe you'd like to try one for size?"

The fat man studied Liddell's face for signs of a bluff, failed to

detect any. He licked his lips, squeezed back against the cushions.

"What do you want to know?" he whined.

Liddell relaxed his pressure on the trigger. "Why was Shields killed? What did he know?"

Beads of perspiration glistened on the fat man's forehead. "He knew about the olive oil shipment due tomorrow." He swabbed at his forehead. "That fink Monti tipped him off and he was getting ready to sic the Feds on us. Nick Cardell ordered a hit."

Liddell stared at the fat man. "Nick Cardell? Where's he fit into this? He's a night club operator, a racket boy, everything else—but not a waterfront boss."

The fat man nodded his head. "He's in the Syndicate. He handles the white stuff—women and powder. He brings the powder in through our pier." He was desperately anxious to talk now; the words dribbled from his lips.

"What's that got to do with olive oil?"

The fat man shrugged. "That's how the syndicate ships the stuff in. It's in waterproof pouches in the oil drums. They're marked so we know the right one and we forward them up to Cardell. He handles from there." He wiped the perspiration from his quivering jowls. "Monti told the dick—I mean Shields—about twenty casks of oil disappearing every shipment. He started snooping around, started getting ideas. When that broad of his telephoned and offered to sell us his report, we bought. Cardell ordered the hit, and we set Shields up for it. That's straight."

"You yellow rat," the brunette stood in the doorway to the bedroom. She had stripped off the negligee, stood naked, her black hair cascading down over her shoulders. She was long-legged, her hips round and firm. Her breasts strained upward, pink tipped. "I've waited a long time to see someone work that meatball over, mister, but it was worth waiting to see it done right."

She walked toward him, came close. "He always bragged that no one could take me away from him." She stood in front of the fat man, stroked the palms of her hands up over her thighs, up to cup her breasts. "I've never met a man who had the nerve—before."

The fat man jumped out of his chair, glared at her. "Sell me out, and I'll—"

"You think you have an exclusive on selling out?" She looked over to Liddell. "I've waited a long time for a real man." She held her hand out. "He thinks it's the gun that makes the difference, mister. I don't."

Liddell looked at her, grinned. "I don't either." He handed her the .45. "Besides, I promised I'd pay off a couple of people this meatball burned down."

The fat man roared, lunged at him. Liddell sidestepped, brought his right up in a looping uppercut that split the fat man's eyebrow, knocked him back. Marko, howling with pain, lowered his head, charged again. Liddell chopped at the back of the fat neck with the side of his hand. Marko hit the floor first, lay there moaning.

Liddell stood over the quivering hulk on the floor, looked over to where the brunette stood, her finger on the trigger of the .45. As he watched, she let the gun drop to her side. "You took an awful chance, Liddell," she told him softly. "I might have been on his side all the time."

Liddell looked down at the fat man, shook his head. "It didn't figure. The only way a slob like that could hold onto a dream like you would be through fear. The minute we walked in tonight you knew he was through."

The girl stepped across the man on the floor, pressed close against Liddell. "That's why I didn't use the phone in the bedroom to get help for him." She slid her arms around Liddell's neck, melted against him. "You promised to say goodbye before you left."

Liddell grinned. "In the bedroom," he reminded her.

The girl stood on her toes, covered his mouth with hers. He could feel the gentle tremors that shook her body as she strained against him. Her skin was warm and soft; he could smell the perfume of her body. Her lips became agitated, moved against his mouth as she moaned softly. After a moment, she stepped back, licked at her lips with the tip of her tongue.

"I'll be waiting for you."

The man on the floor started moaning his way back to consciousness. Painfully, he raised his head, glared up at them. The girl brought up the barrel of the .45, smashed it against the side of his head, knocked him back to the floor. Without looking back, she walked to the bedroom, left the door open behind her.

Liddell caught the fat man by the collar, dragged him to a chair, dumped him into it. Then he stripped off the fat man's tie, tied his wrists to the back legs of the chair.

"In case you get wanderlust, you can carry the chair with you," Liddell growled at him. He looked at the fat man for a moment, then turned, followed the girl.

Inspector Herlehy sat behind his oversized, unpainted desk in headquarters, stared at Johnny Liddell with no sign of enthusiasm. Lee Devon of Seaway Indemnity stood at the window, stared down on the street below.

"You've got something up your sleeve, Liddell," Herlehy snorted. "You want me to keep this meatball on ice and not book him until tomorrow. It smells."

Liddell fished a cigarette from his pocket, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, touched a match to it. "I didn't have to bring Marko in, Inspector. After all, he's the guy that set me up for a kill. I could have burned him down and nobody would have blamed me for it. Instead I deliver him to you and you accuse me of pulling a fast one."

The man at the window turned, walked over to where a water-cooler was humming to itself in the corner, poured himself a drink. "I think Liddell is right, Inspector. If we announce the arrest of Marko, the Syndicate may divert that shipment of oil and we'll lack the evidence to smash the ring." He drained the cup, dropped it into the basket. "What harm can come of keeping Marko on ice until after the ship has docked and the Federal men have a chance to raid the pier?"

Herlehy raked his clenched fingers through his hair, growled. "I don't know. That's what worries me." He glared at Liddell. "It doesn't sound like this character to turn a killer in and just call it a day. He's more likely to square accounts first."

"Maybe I've turned over a new leaf," Liddell shrugged. "Anyway, I've already turned him over to you and if you bury him in some precinct out in the sticks I can't get at him."

The inspector punished his perpetual wad of gum, shook his head. "It just doesn't seem natural." He looked over to Devon. "Your company got the dope it needs?"

Devon nodded. "We may not be able to make a case stick against some of them, but we've got enough on them to start a general clean-up down there." He looked to Liddell. "That was the job Barney Shields started out to do. Liddell finished it up for him."

Liddell pulled himself out of the chair, crushed his cigarette out in the ashtray on the inspector's desk. "I don't know if you can make a murder rap stick on Marko, Inspector. He gave the contract for the kill to Denver, but there's not much chance that he'll admit it." He rubbed his knuckles. "As a matter of fact, I had a little difficulty making him talk myself. And without corroboration, I don't think it would stand up."

"We'll take care of Marko," Herlehy assured him. He watched Liddell walk to the door, shook his head. "It still doesn't smell kosher, knowing that we can't pin a murder rap on him, knowing he did the killing and you still bringing him in." He fished a fresh piece of gum from his drawer, denuded it of its wrapper. "Maybe you have turned over a new leaf, at that. Maybe we ought to buy him dinner tonight, Devon."

Liddell shook his head. "I've got a date. And she's prettier than

you. We're going out to Nick Cardell's place and celebrate."

"Watch out for that place, Johnny," Devon warned. "I hear the wheels out there are rigged. A guy could lose his shirt out there."

"And that ain't all," Liddell grinned.

"Nick's" was an old North Shore estate that had been converted into a de luxe gambling set-up. From the outside, it gave no indication of its character, looked like any country estate that had been kept up. Shrubs, lawn and gardens were in good condition and it was only by the canopied entrance that it could be distinguished from its neighbors.

Johnny Liddell turned the rented Buick over to a uniformed attendant, followed the brunette up the broad stairs to the entrance. A man in a tuxedo stood at the door, greeted the girl, studied Liddell quizzically.

"A friend of mine, Lou," she explained. "Marko couldn't make it tonight. Is Nick around?"

The man in the tuxedo opened a door that led to a large reception hall filled with small groups of formally dressed patrons.

"Business or social?" the man in the tuxedo wanted to know.

"A message from Marko."

The man in the tuxedo nodded, walked to a phone near the door. He pressed a button on its base, waited a moment, then muttered into it. After a second, he dropped the receiver back on its hook. "He'll be with you in a few minutes. Want to wait at the bar?"

The girl looked at Liddell. He nodded. She led the way into one of the parlors that had been converted into a lounge. A bar ran the full length of the room. Liddell found a pair of barstools, signalled for the waiter, ordered two bourbons. The man behind the stick made a production out of selecting a bottle from the backbar, pouring two drinks. After he had shuffled out of earshot, the girl turned to Liddell. "You think it's smart coming out here like this, Johnny?" she asked in a low voice. "By tomorrow they'll have enough on him to put him away for a long time."

"That's just the trouble. They'll put him where I can't get at him."

The girl shuddered a little, pressed against him. "You scare me a little, Johnny. Not the way Marko used to scare me, but in a way that kind of excites me." She put her hand on his knee, turned her lips up to be kissed. "I guess I like violent men."

"You'd better stay here when I get in to see Cardell, baby," Liddell told her. "We may have to leave fast."

She shook her head. "You can't get in without me. I'm the one that has the message from Marko. Remember?"

"It might get rough," he warned.

"That's why I insist on going with you," she wrinkled her nose at him. She sipped at her glass, studied him over the rim. "Are you going to kill him?"

"He sent two men out to kill me, baby. I deserve at least one crack at him, don't I?" He looked around, made sure no one was within earshot. "No matter what the Feds get in the raid tomorrow, Cardell may be able to wiggle out of it. I want to make sure he doesn't get off completely free." He took a deep swallow out of his glass, nudged the girl as the man in the tuxedo started across the room to where they sat.

"The boss can see you now," he told the girl. "He's out back in his office. Will you follow me?"

The girl finished her drink, slid off the barstool. Her fingers sought Liddell's hand, gave it a brief squeeze. They followed the man in the tuxedo to a door set at the far end of the bar. He knocked twice, identified himself to the man on the other side. The door slid open and they stepped through into a large room equipped with roulette wheels, a crap table and a wall lined with slot machines. A low buzz of conversation spiced with the click of roulette balls flowed out at them as they entered. Another tuxedoed floor man nodded to them pleasantly, closed the sliding door behind them.

The brunette picked her way across the floor, circled the roulette layout, headed for a small corridor at the far end. It led to a metal door which carried the warning "Private—Employees Only." The girl knocked and, after a moment, the electric buzzer clicked.

The room beyond was large and comfortably furnished. Nick Cardell sat in an easy chair, knees crossed, fingertips touching in front of his chest. He was a big man who filled the chair to overflowing. He was conservatively tailored. Wore a red carnation in his buttonhole. His greying hair was thick, wavy. "Come in. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." His lips peeled back from a perfect set of teeth in a grin that failed to defrost the icy blue of his eyes.

They stepped in, closed the door behind them. Liddell felt the snout of a gun jabbed into his back, froze.

"That's the smart thing to do, fellow," Cardell told him. "Get Condon in here, Al." One of the men behind Liddell went out the door, was back in a minute. The redheaded meatball who had been with Marko at the Harbor Cafe that morning walked around. Liddell, nodded.

"That's the guy, Nick."

The icy blue eyes flicked at him. "Call me Cardell. That's my name."

Condon tried a smile, missed by a mile. "Okay, Mr. Cardell. No offense." He turned his eyes back to Liddell. "He took Marko out of the Harbor Cafe this morning. I ain't been able to find him since."

Cardell looked Liddell over. "You're Liddell, aren't you?" Without waiting for an answer, he turned to the girl. "Where is Marco?"

"He was home the last time I saw him."

"You're a liar," Condon snarled. "I was there just before I came out here to give Mr. Cardell the score. Nobody was there." He turned to the man in the chair. "She's working with this fink." He licked at his lips. "I could make her tell."

"Keep your hands off her, meatball," Liddell told him. The muzzle of the gun in his back bored deeper, made him wince.

"See what you can do with her, Condon," the white-haired man nodded.

Condon grinned, walked over to where the girl stood, grabbed her wrist, twisted it. "Where is Marko, baby?" A thin drool of saliva glistened at the side of his mouth, ran down to his chin. He twisted harder, brought a scream from the girl. "Where is he?" He brought his face close to hers.

Suddenly, she brought up her knee, sank it in his groin. He loosened the hold on her wrist, clasped both hands to his midsection, sank to the floor. Liddell felt the pressure of the muzzle in his back relax for a second. He threw himself to the right, twisted and slashed out at the gun hand. The man behind him was caught flat-footed, his reflexes were too slow to squeeze the trigger. The gun went sliding across the floor. Before the man could move, Liddell was on him.

He jabbed out with the tips of his fingers, sank them in the man's adam's apple, sent him to the floor gagging and gasping for breath. Then he turned to Cardell. The white-haired man was standing at his desk, jamming his finger on a hidden button.

"He's calling for help, Liddell," the girl shouted. "Bolt that door. They can't break it down."

Liddell threw the heavy bolts on the door, turned the key. When he turned to face Cardell, the white haired man had a gun in his hand.

"It looks like the only way to get a thing done right is to do it yourself, doesn't it, Liddell?" The gun in his hand was pointed at Liddell's midsection. "You've been pretty lucky until now, but—"

"Drop the gun, Nick," the girl broke in.

The white-haired man turned startled eyes on the girl, gaped at the ridiculously toy-like .25 she held in her hand. He swung his gun, snapped a shot at her. It hit her in the shoulder, swung her halfway around. His second shot caught her squarely in the chest, slammed her back against the wall, where she slid to the floor.

Liddell went for his .45, but almost before it had cleared leather, the white-haired man had made a break for the far wall. He turned, snapped a shot at Liddell that

chewed splinters out of the wall next to his head. Liddell ducked, dropped away. The white haired man touched a hidden spring, disappeared through a sliding door. Liddell snapped a shot at the doorway, waited. When there was no answering fire, he crept over to where the girl lay. Her hand was pressed to her breast in a futile effort to stem the blood. Already, a thin stream of red was seeping through her fingers.

"Don't worry about me, Liddell. Go after him." When he tried to slide his arm around her, she shook her head. "He'll be back in a minute with his goons. Go after him." She coughed weakly, a thin stream of red ran from the corner of her mouth. She tried to talk, sagged back. After a moment, her eyes began to glaze.

Liddell swore under his breath, crept to the sliding door. It led to a small passageyay. Beyond he could see the parking lot. Gun poked in front of him, he worked his way cautiously to the end of the passageway. Half a dozen cars were grouped near the entrance. One of them was the rented Buick.

He looked around, saw no sign of Cardell. Suddenly, he heard voices from the direction of the front of the club. He caught the flash of white shirt fronts in the dim light. Cardell was returning with two tuxedoed guards.

Liddell estimated his chances of making the car, then sprinted from the passageway. He had just slammed the door behind him when Cardell spotted him. The night club man raised his hand; it seemed to belch fire. A small hole appeared in the windshield.

Liddell kicked the car into life, eased it into gear as Cardell and the tuxedoed guards came charging at him, their guns blasting. Liddell flicked on the headlights, waited until Cardell was in the center of them. The night club man stood there, squeezing his trigger. The windshield fell to bits around Liddell as his foot released the clutch, jammed down on the gas. The car roared, sprang forward like a living thing.

There was a faint jar, then the road was empty in the glare of the headlights. Liddell jammed on the brakes, walked back to where the men lay in the road. Two of them were still living, but the white-haired man lay on his back, one leg folded crazily under him. His gun lay near his outstretched hand.

"You're right, Nick. If a man wants a thing done right, he's got to do it himself." Liddell turned, shouldered his way through the crowd that was pouring out of the club, and headed for a telephone.

DECOY for a pigeon

Thelma could do things to a man . . . be he con, screw or warden.

BY HERB HARTMAN

The change in wardens was tough on Corky. He hal it soft with old man Fetterson. The old boy was tough on you, but he looked the other way a lot of the time. Times when Corky was making some bread on the side. Times when you had a good thing going that didn't hurt anyone.

So it was a little H and some joy-juice. No one got hurt, and even on the outside the big brains didn't have that kind of stuff licked. Yeah, Fetterson was OK.

But from the first day that Dr. Wagner took over the screws knew things would be different. That "Dr." for one thing. He had his Ph.D, but he didn't have to wag it in your face.

Corky counted up one day in the yard. There were seven different groups all working on breaks and two nuts who had schemes of knocking off the old man right away. "They won't work," Corky was telling Davey Shultz. "Them nuts think they can break out. Look around; since Dillinger, nobody's broken out of here. It takes brains and that's what they ain't got."

But Corky had a plan. It took nerve and planning but it would work. He was waiting till the last minute to see if he really could do it all by himself. He didn't need these chowderheads once he was out, but he might need a hand before he got clear of the place.

Corky's mind wandered. Thelma

was the key. Thelma: what a stinking name for such a luscious woman. Thelma: with that nasty habit of always pulling at the hem of her sweater like a teen age school girl. But no one ever bothered to complain. Thelma knew how to inhale as she did it with that far off look in her eyes; hell, no one believed Thelma could be as innocent as that look said she was. Out they went and she'd usually throw in a twitch of the hip as she turned, just for good measure; whenever Thelma's body faded, she was making sure they'd always remember her anyhow. "What a body," Corky said out loud.

"What'd you say, scum?" It was Madison, the guard.

"Nothing," Corky said with a surprisingly courteous smile. "How you today, Mr. Madison?"

It was part of the plan. Be nice. Be nice to everyone: guards, warden, cons, delivery men, everyone.

And it was working. Once a week Corky was assigned to help Henderson in the tailor shop—take out the suits that were delivered to the hospital people in the mental institutions of the state. Just him and Henderson for five minutes at the delivery gate. Sure, there was a screw on the wall and two inside the gate; but outside, as they opened the back of the truck, it yas just him and Henderson.

And that was the simple plan. But it took Thelma; ah, Thelma; those calves that could look both muscular and provocative at the same time. He'd had to settle for calf-watching for the past two years; ten to go and just calf-watching ahead as she left the visiting room each week.

Those visiting days, that was another thing. Corky liked sweaters, but Thelma knew something he liked better. She'd come into the visiting room after Corky was already seated. She'd come up to the back of the chair on her side of the screen and pause. "How you been, Corky?" she'd ask in a sexy voice. "Seen anything you like?"

Corky would rise as if inspired to be a gentleman; and as he did Thelma would slowly and purposefully bend way over in front to sit down. Thelma made sure it was a low necked peasant type dress and that her back was to the guard. Down she'd bend. Down the front of her dress would dip. No bra. Plenty of light. For the longest time she'd stay bent, arranging her dress beneath her and adjusting the chair in readiness to sit down. When Corky was so aroused that he had to sit down, she'd slowly lower herself to the seat and invitingly lick her lips right in Corky's face. Yes sir, Thelma made sure Corky didn't forget exactly what was waiting for him on the outside.

But the visits weren't all planned for such moments. In the whispered tones allowed them, Thelma and Corky would work out the details. She was to be nice to the war-

den and always remind him of the inmate's name she was visiting: her brother, of course. She'd speak in tearful terms of the harsh life in prison compared to the tender, loving care of his mother's home in Iowa. And it had had its affect on the new warden. Corky had been transferred to the library and given a soft desk job.

But there was more to the visits, yet. Thelma always drove by the delivery gate in the red convertible. She'd hike up her dress and drive slowly. Then she'd wave like mad at the guards each Wednesday. In a few weeks after she started this, she noticed that each Wednesday there were extra guards on the wall.

Down the side street she'd drive and park. Then, walking, she'd head up the alley and watch through the field glasses. Each Wednesday it was the same. The guards, minus their rifles, would put their heads together and talk—comparing views on the babe in the red car, she was sure. Then they'd split up and hurry below. A few minutes away from duty was OK, but they'd better be back.

The plan was working well. For several more weeks the routine was carried out. Corky had every angle covered.

There was one thing that Corky didn't know about. It was what happened to Thelma after she checked on the guards through the field glasses. He assumed that she went home like a good girl and waited till next Wednesday.

He might have found profound interest in her real activites. More and more often, she'd stop at the hamburger joint down the street till six and then drive back almost to the prison and turn down a street in a very fancy neighborhood. Up a driveway behind some trees and into a private garage. Down came the garage door behind her and out she went in to the house.

"Thelma," a voice would call—half asking, half welcoming.

She drop her coat on a chair and drift into the living room. Soft music from a stereo; soft lights; a pair of drinks on the table. And there, coming to meet her was Jeff—Jeff Wagner, that is. Dr. Jeff Wagner, new warden at the pen.

The ritual didn't vary much. She'd down the drink, melt into his arms and a pair of powerful hands would lift her gently off the floor and carry her into the nearby bedroom. Corky would have liked the scene, but hated the players.

Thelma would stretch. Jeff would slip out of his robe and stand nude before her. Thelma liked that, he had found after a little experimenting.

He'd come to her and begin to undress her. The dress that scooped so low in front was skin tight in the back. The long zipper was hard to slip down, especially when Jeff tried to do it while standing up against Thelma in the front.

He'd reach around her and unzip the dress. Her hands working slowly up and down his nude body didn't help his efficiency a bit.

Under the dress was nothing. It was that simple. The bed was turned down and in cold weather Jeff had the thoughtful habit of warming it with the electric blanket before turning it down.

In an unhurried fashion, the passion would build. First a delightful trip up her legs with his hand. Then a rolling of her buttocks while she was astride him. Soon the breathing was heavy and the patience short. Her kisses all over his chest brought him along quickly. They would merge. They would thrash around the bed. All the dreams of the long prison nights that Corky ever had were pale in comparison. His Thelma was in a fit of delight and Jeff reaped the exquisite harvest of her excitement. On and on they'd travel to the end of the ride. Variations were explored and satiation was postponed. The bed was a shambles when they were done, but two vigorous people were drifting in a sexual heaven all their own.

But Corky didn't see the scene. He didn't dream it. When he moved his dreams away from Thelma, they centered on the date. A week from Wednesday.

Two things had to be done. First, Henderson had to make his delivery that week exactly at 4:15. Thelma could arrange that easy enough. She'd cultivated the girl who worked in the office at the delivery shop. A late lunch hour that day could throw Henderson an hour behind because of the train schedule he had to consider.

At 4:15, Thelma would just be passing the wall near the delivery gate and the guards who would be assigned to watch the truck would be on the wall instead of the yard where they belonged. Without their rifles and gaping at that babe in the convertible, there wasn't a chance in the world that they'd see Corky take off in the truck.

The days moved by. Wednesday came and Thelma made her grand entrance into the visiting room. The low bow. The twin mounds of flesh dipping nearly out of the thin fabric. A sucking noise as Corky drank it in. A smile of temptation on Thelma's lips. "Soon," she hissed as she swayed ever so slightly, giving her breasts the necessary swing to flip the nipples clear out of the neckline. No one but Corky saw it, but he saw it plainly.

"Soon," he hissed back and sat quickly to hide his aroused passion.

They plotted the details. The convertible would meet the delivery truck around the corner. Old Henderson's knock on the head would keep him from seeing the switch in cars. The truck would block the narrow street and further delay the prison cars.

The following six days went by like a Chinese water torture experi-

ence. Corky was short tempered for the first time in two and a half years. He crumpled the mouth of Shorty Martin, and the smaller fellow came up spitting teeth behind the library shelf marked "western."

But Corky made it to Wednesday. He was ready right on time to deliver the week's production of clothing. Henderson parked his truck outside the delivery gate an hour late. His staff inside the prison shop was impatient; waiting for him to come had set them back an hour in their knock-off time. Henderson came in cussing. "This damn job is for the birds. You guys quit crabbing. You'll get paid for it. Just make sure this lot is better than the last. The old man at the funny farm is griping about the pants being too tight."

Without even looking up he shoved half the load into Corky's arms and started across the yard. Corky noticed the two guards waiting at the gate. Then he saw the guard on the wall motion for them to come up.

"Hey, Henderson," one of the yard guards yelled, "slam that door when you come back in. I'll let you back out after that con is back in the tailor shop. I'm going up on the wall for a minute." The guards on the wall had told everyone in sight about the babe who came by. Most of them knew who she was, but were close mouthed about their view from the wall around the cons.

Corky smiled. "Perfect," he muttered. All alone with Henderson. Out the gate at a regular pace. Not a guard in the yard. He saw a flash of red in front of the delivery truck and knew Thelma was on time. No sounds from the wall, but he knew they were intent on the white thighs and the low neckline in that convertible.

Quickly Corky threw aside the clothing and flashed the foot long pipe. One knock on the head and Henderson was slumped silently on the clothing he carried. Around the truck and slowly in gear. No noises no speed, no alerting the men on the wall.

Off he went. Around the corner. "There she is," he yelled, safe from the view of the grey walls.

In two swift motions he had the truck exactly across the narrow street. The keys went into a bush and three steps got Corky inside the convertible and off they went. Easy as that.

Thelma smiled as Corky worked her over with both hands. "Honey, I gotta drive," she said, but made no move to stop him. One hand down the front of her dress and the other up under the hemline.

"It's been so long, baby," he crooned.

"Yeah, but we gotta split. The old car is up in the next block. Here's where I park and give them a bum steer after you've gone." She pulled over to the curb and Corky slipped out. "Now don't forget,

honey. Eight o'clock at that farmhouse on the Pennington Road. I'll go right there. You wait."

He was gone and in two minutes had the old car humming down a back street on his way to Pennington Road.

The red convertible stayed for a minute. Then Thelma started the engine and moved off slowly toward the fashionable neighborhood, the driveway behind the trees and the hidden garage.

As she entered the kitchen, she heard Jeff on the phone.

"Calm yourself, Joe. Nothing to worry about." He saw Thelma come in and pulled the extension cord out some and moved toward her. "O, Joe, fix up those parole recommendations I told you about." Jeff reached out and encircled Thelma's waist. She rubbed her hand inside the dressing robe and his hand slid lower to her hips.

"Joe, something's come up here. And, Joe, about that break this afternoon. Send a squad out to the old Henley place. Yes, that old farm on the Pennington Road. Say in ten minutes. That should do it. Yes, and Joe . . . don't take any chances. That guy's dangerous. Know what I mean?" The robe was off by then and the bedroom looked inviting.

Fight them all

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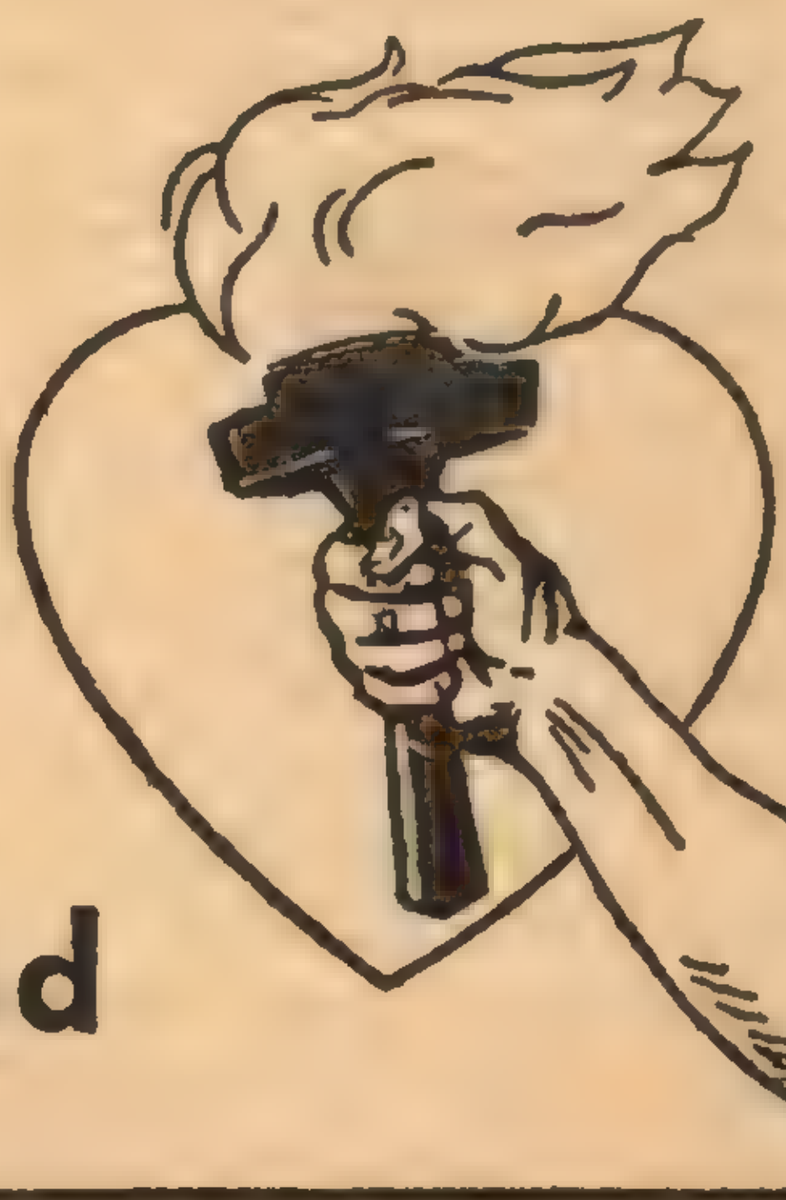

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NIGHTMARE'S EDGE

BY ROBERT PAGE JONES

I CAME to on Thursday, knowing that I had killed somebody.

For a long time I didn't move. I just lay there on the hard floor, staring into the darkness in a sort of paralyzed horror, unable for a moment to bridge the fragmented gap between nightmare and reality.

My heart socked in my chest.

I moved my hand out along the floor experimentally.

She must still be here, I thought. *She must still be here in the room with me . . .*

I almost cried out as sudden images flooded my brain. They seemed to ooze out of the darkness around me. They rushed at me, dissolving into one another in a booze-blurry fantasy, until I grabbed my ears and lurched to my feet screaming.

I staggered rubber-kneed into the bathroom and switched on the light. Running the water full cold, I emersed my head and sloshed water over the back of my neck, but the images remained. They flick-

It had been a monumental drunk. He came out of it convinced he had killed someone . . . but he couldn't find a body.

ered inside my darkened skull like speeded-up scenes in a horror movie.

I reached for a towel, my eyes still squeezed shut, and as I rubbed my face I felt a sickening stiffness as if a piece of cardboard had been sewn into the cloth.

My heart really went wild then.

There was a large, pancake-sized splash of blood on the towel, clotted and dried. And my shirt front was covered with it.

I lurched forward, supporting myself on the edge of the sink.

Well, that eliminated the possibility of a nightmare. There was no longer any doubt. I'd really killed her.

Killed her!

I looked into the mirror.

My face was a mess. The puffy eyes had lines beneath them that looked as if they might have been drawn there with black India ink. And the skin on one side was scratched. Someone had really clawed me. I leaned forward, turning my head sideways, and examined the three parallel furrows that swooped down my left cheek below the two-day growth of stubble. Maybe the scratches accounted for the shirt and the bloody towel . . .

For what seemed like a long time I couldn't force myself to go back into the other room. Something held me. I was afraid of what I might find there.

But in the end I knew that I had no choice and so I went in and turned on the naked overhead bulb that hung from the ceiling on a long cord.

Nothing.

Just my crummy room. Rumpled bed, sagging dresser with my wallet and change strewn over it, big bass viol in its usual place in the corner. I opened the closet, half expecting a dead body, still warm, to fall out of it at my feet, murdered. Nothing there, either. Just a few things packed in there on hangers. I got down on my hands and knees and looked under the bed. Dust.

I let out my breath then and sat down on the bed.

I shut my eyes and almost groaned with relief.

But my hands still trembled. Because the thing was still there in my mind. Something had happened. Something so crazy and terrible, a violence so horrible, that my brain was trying to conceal it.

And, whatever it was, it involved Lila.

Something jogged my memory. Lila's face. Suddenly I could see it before me with great distinctness . . .

Red lips twitching. Dark eyes locked on mine in utter fear and despair. Cheeks wet with tears. Then her eyes closing, head dangling to one side, while my hands pulled tighter and tighter on the rope twisted around her neck.

Lila!

I lept to my feet again with a sudden stab of panic.

There was an opened bottle of bourbon on the dresser. I sloshed some of it into a glass and drank it down. I stood staring at my reflection in frozen horror. The bourbon spread through my stomach like hot oil. I took the bottle back to the bed and lay with it cradled in my arm as I stared up at nothing.

I began to get really scared then.

I put my hand on my forehead and felt sweat.

I drank.

Get hold of yourself, I thought. *Stop imagining things. You got drunk last night, that's all. Lots of people get drunk. Only you drank so much you ended up with a head full of psychotic fantasies. All you have to do to correct that is stop drinking. Or drink so much that the brain becomes completely anesthetized, so shot full of darkness, that it is incapable even of the lunatic trick of dreaming.*

I tilted up the bottle, splashing liquid across my face, until I found my mouth. This was the way. If I retreated far enough, deep enough into darkness, the nightmare and the fantasies couldn't catch me.

My last recollection before oblivion was of the first rays of sun slanting through my window, casting a pattern of grotesque shapes across the floor . . .

Henry Jackson came for me on Friday.

Joseph Henry Jackson. You've heard of him if you're past forty. In the Thirties, before sickness forced him into a decline, he was one of the best jazz piano men around.

Good old Joe Henry.

A pal.

I opened my eyes and saw him standing up there, cloudy and misshapen, like a skinny monster that had stepped out of a junk dream.

I screamed.

I sprang up convulsively and felt strong hands gripping me, forcing me back down on the bed. The room swam. My hands clawed. The bottle fell off the bed, went *thunk* on the hard floor, and rolled against the wall.

Suddenly he slapped me.

It was like being struck across the mouth with a short length of rubber hose.

"Quit flyin', man," he said. "You ain't no bird."

I let out my breath and lay there. Joe Henry stood a yard away, observing me, his breathing harsh. My eyes couldn't focus on him. But there was no mistaking that familiar shape. Tall, and thin almost to emaciation, his back almost double from too many years of bending over a keyboard.

I shook my head, the movement setting up a murderous throbbing in my skull.

"You sick, man?" Joe Henry looked at the blood on my shirt, unbelieving, his black face set in hard wrinkles like a primative mask. "You want me to get a doctor?"

"I killed Lila," I said.

"What?"

"I strangled her."

"You *what*? Say, listen, man . . ." Joe Henry picked up the empty bourbon bottle, squinted through it at the light, and put it on the dresser. "You gonna drink a whole bottle of this squirrel juice, you ought to let somebody know, just so we won't be lookin' for you. I been banging on every door in town . . ."

I wasn't listening to him.

I needed a drink. Because the panic had come on again. Only now it was worse, because now it was daylight and I could hear the traffic honking by in the street, and I knew I wasn't dreaming. I'd really killed her . . .

Murderer!

The word exploded in my brain.

I yanked my suitcase from the closet and started packing. I trembled and shook. I had to get out.

"What're you doing?"

"I've got to go," I said. "I've got to get out of here."

"Say, you ain't kidding, are you? You really think you killed her . . ."

I didn't say anything. There was no point in trying to explain. No sense in trying to make him understand.

I slammed things into the suitcase.

"Johnny." He took my arm and stood talking softly to me. "We're all washed up at The Hideway. Kostinak canned us. He . . ."

I had my hand on the lid of the suitcase.

"Why?" I said. "Why'd he do that?"

"Well, when you didn't show up for three nights in a row, he . . ."

"*Three* nights!"

"Yeah. I came by a couple of times and knocked on the door. When you didn't answer this morning I got worried and just busted in."

"What's today?"

"Friday."

I couldn't believe it.

"Oh, my God." I groaned and sat down on the bed. I looked up at Joe Henry. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to run out on you guys and get you canned. I'll talk to Kostinak. I'll tell him it was my fault . . ."

"Forget it. We'll get another date."

In spite of the fear I felt bad.

We'd worked hard for a chance at The Hideway. And after a slow start we'd begun to pack 'em in pretty good. Just the three of us. Joe Henry on piano, Bernie Withers on horn, and me on bass. We'd been together a long time. Since the early forties when we'd run into each other in the Army. We made a good sound.

"Just take it easy on the booze, Johnny," Kostinak had warned me when he signed us for The Hideway. "You come in drunk just once, or miss just one session, and you're through. And that goes for your

buddies. Whether or not they work is strictly up to you. Understand?"

He'd made me sore. Because I hadn't touched a drop in over a year. Not even a beer.

And then one night Lila had showed up with some guy and when I saw them together it all boiled up inside of me again. I'd thought it was over, that I'd shoved it over in a corner of my mind where it couldn't hurt me, but I'd been wrong. It had just been crouching there waiting to jump out at the first opportunity.

"I killed her," I said aloud.

"When?"

"I don't know. I can't remember. Last night. Maybe the night before."

"Where?"

"I don't know that either."

"Then how do you know you killed her? Maybe you just thought you did. Maybe it was the booze . . ."

"You think there can ever be any doubt about a thing like that?" I screamed at him. I grabbed my head in my hands. "I tell you I killed her."

"Think," he said.

"I can't. It's all kind of fuzzy. I guess it started Tuesday night at The Hideaway. I remember that part clearly enough. I . . ."

"Go on."

"Hell, you know how it used to be with Lila and me. I thought I was over it okay but when she showed up at the club I went crazy. I couldn't stand seeing her with that creep. So I started drinking. Just a couple of . . ."

"You shouldn't have done that, Johnny. You know what they told you at the hospital. You shouldn't have started drinking again."

"Hell, you think I don't know that?" I slammed down the lid of the suitcase. "Jesus. I . . ."

"Okay. What happened after you started hitting the booze?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. I remember leaving the club. I guess I just wandered."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Think. There must be something you remember."

"I don't know!"

"Okay, Johnny. Take it easy."

"Wait! There is something!" I pressed my palms against my temples. "Irving."

"Irving?"

"Yeah. A little stuffed monkey I won at a carnival Lila and I went to a couple of years ago. Funny, I'd forgotten she even had it. But I remember seeing it sitting there on the bookcase . . ."

"In her room?"

"Yes."

"Then you were at her place."

"Sure. That's it. I must have wandered around for a while and then ended up over there."

"Do you remember what happened while you were there? Anything at all?"

"No. Only that I . . ."

"What?"

The room began to swim suddenly before me.

"I killed her-"

"How do you know? Do you actually remember killing her?"

"I can feel it. I can *feel* her throat in my hands. It's as if . . ."

"Look. Maybe you only had a fight. Maybe you just started to choke her and then got scared and ran off." Joe Henry got to his feet and began looking around the room. "Do you have a telephone?"

"What for?"

"I'm going to call her."

"No!"

I grabbed his arm and held on frantically.

"What's the matter? Don't you want to find out what really happened?" he said.

"I guess so," I said weakly. I let go of him and my breath rushed out of my lungs in a sob. "There's a pay phone out in the hall."

"What's the number?"

I gave it to him and watched him go out. He left the door open and I heard him dialing. Then there was a long period of silence.

The silence did more to upset me than anything that had happened so far.

It was terrible, to have nothing but blackness to show for a piece of my life, almost like being dead. Only I had been a live corpse. Stumbling around in the night . . .

On the way back in Joe Henry picked up the newspapers that had accumulated on the floor outside my door. Three of them. Wednesday's, Thursday's, Friday's *Times*.

"I told you," I said.

"It doesn't have to mean anything, you know," he said. "Maybe she's gone out. We can try again in a little while."

"She's there," I said weakly.

"How do you know?"

"I told you. I just know . . ."

I felt really let down then. I felt like grabbing my face in my hands and crying like a kid. Because way down deep I suppose I'd continued to hope that the whole thing was actually a bad dream, that she would be there to answer the phone, alive and screaming at me:

"You must be out of your mind, Johnny Palmer! Forcing your way in here . . . behaving like a maniac . . . almost killing me! I still have a good mind to call the police!"

Joe Henry had spread the newspapers on the bed and was going through them intently.

"You see," he said reassuringly. "If you'd killed her there would be something in the papers, wouldn't there?"

"No. Not unless they'd found the body." I stripped off the bloody shirt and began replacing it with a clean one. "I'm going over there."

"You think we should call the police?"

"No, damnit . . ."

"Okay, Johnny. You're the boss. You want me to go with you?"

"No, thanks." I put my hand gently on his shoulder. "If she is there,

if I did what I think I did, I'll have to run and keep on running. It'll be better if you're not involved."

"Let me tell you somethin'," he said. He looked at me and there was an expression of sadness in his yellow eyes. "I go back a long way, longer than you might think, and if I've learned anything in all that time it's this: there ain't ever any place to run . . ."

"Maybe. Maybe there isn't. But that's something I'll have to decide for myself when the time comes."

I gripped hands with him for a moment.

"Good luck, kid," he said finally. "You know where you can find a good piano man when you need one. Just thunk a few strings on that bass of yours and I'll be there."

"Thanks," I said.

I left him sitting on my bed, staring down at the hard wooden floor, and I didn't hear his feet behind me on the stairs even when I'd reached the bottom floor and pushed out onto the street.

It was just beginning to turn hot when I came up out of the subway and began walking along the sidewalk in front of the derelict apartment buildings.

Kids played in the street. A woman in a sweated dress sat fanning herself on wide stone steps, talking disinterestedly to the beat cop, while she breast-fed her baby. Most of the doors and windows stood open to let in a little breeze. But there was none, and would be none.

Lila and I had been born on a street just like this one. We'd been brought up amid the shouting and the clank of junk wagons and the heavy aroma of boiling cabbage. Our folks had been friends. We'd gone through school together. And from the time we were old enough to hide up on the roof and whisper and touch each other we'd dreamed about the time I'd have my own band and make a thousand dollars a week just for playing music.

The closest I'd ever come was seventy-eight bucks. I'd been playing bass in a little combo on Fifty-Second Street and for a while the late hours music crowd had taken a fancy to the guy who blew trumpet for us and we'd had some pretty good weeks. But it hadn't lasted. Nothing ever lasted. I was married to Lila then and for the first few years it had been good but that hadn't lasted either.

I lit a cigarette as I walked along.

My head throbbed and my mouth tasted awful and even my vision was blurred. Everything I looked at seemed to have soft rings around it. The yells of the kids playing in the street were like sharp sticks breaking over my head.

After a few blocks I went inside one of the buildings, climbed a dark, unlit stairway and stopped outside a door. I was sweating badly from the climb. The door was unlettered and there was no name card in the little metal frame over the bell. I knocked.

There was no answer after about a minute and I knocked again.

Still no answer.

"Who you lookin' for, mister?"

I whirled.

A little girl, five or six years old maybe, stood gazing up at me. I hadn't heard her come up the stairs and figured she'd been playing in a corner of the darkened hall. Her blond hair was matted and tangled and her nose ran streaks through the crusted dirt on her face. But, with all of that, she was cute.

"Elison," I said. "Lila Elison."

"What do you want?"

"I'm a friend of hers."

"Do you sell things?"

"No."

"What's your name?"

I banged hard on the door.

I turned the knob but it was locked.

I hit the door as hard as I could.

"Lila!"

"Don't yell. Mommy says people shouldn't yell."

"Shut up, kid!"

"Maybe she isn't home."

"Listen . . ."

"I know where she keeps the key," the girl said. "She puts it in her mailbox. I've seen her do it."

"Where?"

"Downstairs. It's right next to my mommy's mailbox."

I ran down two flights. I didn't expect to find the key but I knew that by looking into the mailbox I could learn something. If it was empty, if the key wasn't there, I'd know that she was upstairs. I'd know once and for all that I'd killed her.

I tore my nails scrabbling at the metal box.

The key was there! My heart damn near stopped when I saw it. It was tied with a piece of string to a little cardboard disk. Her name was written on it. *Lila Elison*.

I stood there with sweat running down my face and neck.

If she was upstairs in her apartment the box would be empty. But it wasn't empty. She'd dropped the key in the slot and gone out somewhere. She was alive!

"My name's Betty," the little girl said.

I grinned down at her.

"Hi, kid."

I thought about putting the key back in the box and getting out of there. Then something struck me. Maybe she had two keys. Maybe she kept one in the mailbox in case she was ever out someplace and lost the first one.

Maybe she was still up there, dead . . .

I stumbled a couple of times going back up the stairs. In front of her door I hesitated, staring down at the lock. Then I inserted the key quickly and turned it and went inside.

As the door closed behind me I could feel a hard, throbbing knot tightening in me.

I stopped and looked around. It was as if I was entering the room

for the first time. There was nothing much in it besides a sofa and end tables, two chairs, a bookcase, and a serving cart on top of which was an old model television set. One shelf of the bookcase contained cocktail glasses, bar accessories, and a couple of half empty bottles of booze. I poured some bourbon into a glass and drank it.

Then I saw the little cloth monkey I'd won on the carnival midway.

I picked it up and stood holding it for a minute. Something clicked in my brain. That part of it was real at least. I'd actually been inside Lila's apartment.

Something else caught my attention, causing the monkey to slip from my hands. My stomach flopped. I leaned forward and steadied myself by gripping the front edge of the bookcase. I stood that way, staring down at the floor in front of the sofa.

There was a dark welt of stain there, stiff and matted, like the brown smear on the towel in my apartment.

I dropped down on my knees drunkenly and touched the spot with my hands. It was blood, all right. It felt as if someone had poured thick paint on the carpet and let it harden.

I got up quickly and the pain almost split my skull. I didn't know which way to turn. I looked in the bedroom, in the closet, behind the sofa. I went into the bathroom and opened the clothes hamper and rummaged through it. There was a towel wadded up in there with more blood on it. I reeled forward and braced myself against the basin.

Several minutes passed.

I was still standing there with my eyes fixed on the white porcelain when I heard the front door opening . . .

It was Lila.

When she saw me she stood there for a moment, surprised. But only for a moment. She was that kind of girl. Sure of herself and difficult to throw off guard.

"Hello, Johnny," she said softly.

She wore a short-sleeved summer blouse that crushed softly against her body and white gloves.

"If you're looking for the bourbon it's in the bookcase," she said. "Help yourself."

I didn't tell her that I'd already found it.

I picked up the bottle and poured it shakily, my hands so palsied that the neck of the bottle made a chattering noise against the glass.

Behind me, I heard her purse and her gloves fall onto the couch. I imagined her standing there, watching me, a gentle sorrow in her eyes. It was a way she had of looking at me that I hated more than anything in the world.

I turned and faced her.

"I thought I'd killed you," I said hoarsely.

"What?"

At first she must have thought I

was kidding. Or that I'd been drinking and it was the booze talking. But then she sensed that something really was wrong and her face went suddenly serious.

She sat down on the couch and I flopped down beside her.

"What is it?" she said. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know, Lila. Maybe I'm going crazy. But I woke up this morning thinking I'd murdered you, that I'd strangled you with a piece of rope or with a stocking . . ."

"Me?"

"Yes. I know it sounds crazy. But I was so sure of it I had to come over here to see if . . ."

She laughed softly.

"I'm not kidding," I said.

"Well, I can assure you I'm very much live."

"Lila, I . . ."

"Listen. The way you were drinking the other night it's a miracle you don't think you murdered a half dozen people."

"Maybe you're right," I said.

I reached for a cigarette, lit it with fingers that still shook uncontrolably. In the bright light of day I had begun to feel kind of foolish. Then, as I dropped the burned match into a tray, I glimpsed the blood on the carpet.

She must have seen the sudden change of expression because when I turned back to face her her eyes were on mine.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, you know," she said softly. "You really behaved quite badly the other night. I think you *might* have killed me if I hadn't scratched your face. I'm sorry for that. You bled all over the floor."

I winced.

"You must think I'm something," I said. "Staggering in here like some flophouse bum. And not remembering any of it. Not even remembering where I'd been."

"You're not the first person who's gotten drunk and drawn a blank the next day."

"Thanks for rationalizing for me, Lila," I said. "You always were pretty good at that. I'm sure it wasn't easy for you being married to a drunk."

"Please, Johnny . . ."

"I miss you," I said.

"I missed you too, Johnny, for a while. Perhaps I still do. But it didn't make any sense for us to go on hurting each other."

"Listen, can't we . . ."

"No," she said, patting my hand where it lay on the cushion between us, smiling at me. "But I can make you some coffee before you go."

She went out into the kitchen.

I was glad she'd left the room because a lump had begun to come up in my throat. Maybe it was too much relief all at once. Or maybe it was the let-down of finding her alive only to lose her all over again.

I relaxed back on the sofa and lifted my feet to the battered French provincial coffee table. I felt sud-

denly depressed. I wanted a drink but for Lila's sake I decided to fight the temptation.

I closed my eyes. Almost instantly the fog began closing in again. Through the murky depth of my mind I saw a face, gibbering anonymously, and for the brief space of an instant I believed that I had actually gone mad . . .

It didn't make sense.

Lila was *here*. She was in the kitchen, alive, making coffee. I could hear her out there banging a pan.

If the face wasn't her face, then . . . I closed my eyes again and the image became a crazy hodgepodge. Emma, the melon-breasted cocktail waitress at the Hideway. Irene, with the sensuous lips and the passion for strawberries. Laura, poor, mixed-up Laura. My mother . . .

Oh, God, not my mother!

I groaned aloud, half humorously.

Wasn't that what they found at the bottom of every neurosis? Wasn't that the badge of every headshrinker's trade? Some sort of mother complex . . .

Well, I certainly hadn't strangled my mother.

I began to laugh softly. Because it was funny. *Funny*. I'd gotten smashed and the whole thing had degenerated into a crazy vaudeville routine. But I wasn't crazy.

The aroma of boiling coffee came to me from the kitchen, sane and familiar. I remembered a little grocery store in the neighborhood where I was born where coffee beans spilled out of a jar in the window, filling the street with their fragrance. It was the only place in the neighborhood that didn't stink.

I could hear Lila moving around out in the kitchen, humming softly to herself. The refrigerator door opened and closed, followed by the crisp crackle of eggs being broken into a skillet.

They were good sounds. Suddenly I felt hungrier than I'd ever felt in my life.

I stuck a cigarette in my mouth and rummaged through my pocket for matches. In my left pocket I found something else. At first I thought it was a handkerchief balled up in there but then the cigarette fell from my lips to the floor and I sat there in frozen horror. For a long time I couldn't even bring myself to look at the thing.

It was a woman's stocking.

I sat crushing it into a tight little ball and watching it puff open again like some trick flower.

Well, at least now there was no longer any doubt. I'd actually killed someone. I'd gotten stinking drunk and I'd actually strangled someone with a woman's stocking.

Strangled her!

Oddly, with the realization, another cog slipped smoothly into place in my mind.

I'd been in a jazz joint somewhere. That much was crystal clear. But which one? Where? I knew all

of them. *Bernie's, The Daisey, Carl's Clarinet.* I could hear a trumpet playing in my mind, *Paper Doll* it was, soft and sweet.

But where?

Then it hit me. I should have known right away. Because the guy had been playing with an open horn, barely blowing into it, the bell shoved right up against the microphone. Only one guy in the world with a style just like that. I knew where I had to go . . .

I was half way down the stairs before Lila opened the door and hollered after me frantically.

"Johnny! Wait . . ."

I didn't even turn around. I got a cab this time and rode it almost to my front door. *Katcha's Blue Note* is a rickety little hole in the wall right around the corner from my apartment. I used to spend a lot of time there when I wasn't working, sitting in occasionally, but mostly just relaxing at the bar while Harry, the bartender, talked about the days when he'd sided with some of the real top jazz groups in New Orleans.

It was lunch time when I got there and only a few people were inside. I climbed up on a stool and ordered beer and when Harry brought it over to me, frowning, he laid down a tab with sixty-one dollars penciled on it. I could tell by the expression on his face he wasn't kidding.

"What's this?" I said.

"You gonna pay it, Johnny, or you want I should call the cops?"

"What is it?"

"Okay. Have it your way." He shrugged, as if in shrugging he could resolve some problem that bothered him, and started back to where a telephone hung from the wall. "It ain't no skin off my nose if I have to call the cops . . ."

"Hey, wait. I really don't know what you're talking about, Harry. I . . ."

"Don't tell me you don't remember."

"Remember what?" I said.

I had begun to feel sick and uneasy again. I'd been drunk in my day, plenty of times, but I'd never drawn a blank like this one. I began to feel like some kind of Jekel and Hyde character who sprouted fangs in the full of the moon.

"Last night," Harry said solemnly. "You came in here last night with a snoot full and damn near wrecked my place. It was awful."

"Me?"

I grinned at him, trying to keep it light, but it was obvious he wasn't having any.

"You gonna pay me?" he said.

"I broke things, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Gee, Harry, Im sorry."

"Just pay me," he said.

"Sure, Harry. I'll pay you. You know I'll pay you." I signed the tab and pushed it across to him. "I'm sorry, really I am. I guess I was showing off for some dame, eh? Was that it?"

"Dame? There wasn't any dame. You just went crazy, that's all. No reason. Just went clean out of your mind. Dragging that bass fiddle of yours in here at two o'clock in the morning, sitting up here at the bar with your arm around it, loving it up like it was a woman . . ."

Wait a minute! That was something. If I'd come in with my bass it meant I'd gone back to the apartment after leaving Lila's.

". . . buying drinks and setting 'em up in front of that fiddle. Like you was crazy. And then going wild, swinging it over your head like it was a club, smashing it against everything and everybody in sight until there wasn't nothing left but a bunch of kindling tied together with strings . . ."

"I did that?" I said weakly.

"Yeah, you did that. You damn right you did that."

"Jesus."

"Well, just so long as you pay for the damage . . ."

"I told you I would," I said. "Tell me what else happened."

"Huh?"

"What did I do after bustin' up my bass?"

"I dunno. Whatever it was, you didn't do it here. I threw you out."

"Jesus," I said again.

I sat there, staring at my beer.

I was lost again. Dear end. What I needed was a drink, something stronger than beer. No, no drink. No new nightmares until I'd pieced together the last one.

My gaze had been resting on an ashtray with the words *Blue Note* silk screened across the bottom, freshly washed and waiting for the evening's ashes. Why? Why should I be staring at an ash tray. Were my eyes being drawn to it by some thread of remembrance?

Of course. Cigarettes. I'd stopped into an all night cafe for a pack on the way back to my apartment.

I began to laugh softly, then.

The girl had been standing on the sidewalk when I came out of the cafe with the cigarettes. I had watched her while I lit one. A lovely girl in a shining black dress, exquisitely small and delicate, tiny ankles tilting up out of high-heeled pumps. She had had the face of an angel, cool and untouched, and yet in my room she had become a high priestess of passion.

So that was what my mind had been blotting out. Not murder. Not even mayhem. Suddenly it was all too clear. I'd gotten smashed and picked up a broad and taken her back to my apartment with me.

. . . she stood in the center of the room, a smile on her lips, expertly working the zipper at the back of her dress. She moaned, her head falling backwards. The dress fell, revealing her small, nearly-nude body . . .

How simply that explained the stocking in the pocket of my coat. Suddenly I felt achingly, sheepishly relieved. I paid for my beer and went out on the sidewalk. I gri-

maced at the remembered anguish of the preceeding few days. Well, that was what I deserved. You can't fall off the wagon as hard as I did, after a full year without so much as a single drop, and expect to dream of apple pie and roses . . .

I went back to my room.

Joe Henry had left a note saying he'd check back by that evening. Good old Joe Henry. Maybe if I went to Kostinak and carefully explained he would give us another chance. It just didn't make sense to punish the other guys for me.

I sat down on the bed, exhausted.

I slid my hand out amid the tangle of bedclothes and felt a small metal clasp. The touch opened a valve in my brain and I nearly called out in terror. Something moist and warm rose in my throat. God, what now? Don't tell me I'm slipping back into hallucination.

Panicked, I ripped back the covers, and stood staring at the fragile female garments that had been hidden under the heavy curling of blankets and sheets. The black dress, underclothing, diaphanous garter belt with delicate metal clasps. Curled, snakelike hose. But wait! I sprang up, convulsively clawing at the bedclothes.

There was only one stocking. Of course, I had known there would be. The other was still in my pocket where I had put it after . . .

Odd, the feeling of relief as the last patch of darkness fell from my mind and recollection opened within me like a suddenly unstoppered sink, letting into my consciousness the first sickening reality of honest guilt.

Poor girl. I hadn't even known her name.

In an alcoholic frenzy she had become Lila and I had deliberately strangled her, crossing the stocking and tightening it around her throat, staring into her darkening eyes like a maniac.

But where was she?

Her clothes were still here and I had searched carefully through the closet and beneath the bed . . .

Of course.

The recollection was so sharp now I felt for a moment as if I were standing away from myself and observing the scene through someone else's eyes.

My bass case. It leaned in its place in the corner, emmense and foreboding, a dark repository of wood and strings. Only the magic instrument had been taken out and destroyed. And in its place . . .

I sat down on the bed and let it come.

I saw it all. The tugging trip across the floor, the straining and shoving to get arms and legs inside, the banging down of the lid.

Even the final little snick of the clasp, like an audible period, signaling the end for both of us . . .

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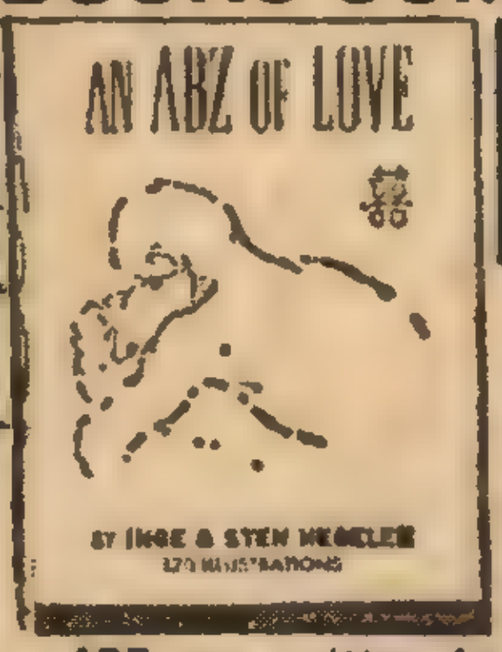

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A Novelette

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"Stay outside the Inner Council," his father had once warned him.
"The closer you get to the top, the closer you get to hell."

MAX BEAVER saw his first fifty dollar bill when he was a runner for a Brooklyn loan shark in the Red Hook neighborhood. "When I crawl up from the gutters of this hood hungry neighborhood," he promised himself, "I'll have them by the bundle."

The promise, made in the seamy streets of the racket neighborhood, became a prediction. Max Beaver was to fight his way up, by way of ladder rungs of bookmaking, numbers and loan-sharking, to Uptown Manhattan where he acquired bundles of fifties—and bundles of headaches. After seven years of fighting, killing, scheming, double-crossing, bribing and muscling, he sometimes wished he were back on mobster boulevard of Red Hook where ambition and death had been evilly spawned.

"I was a nobody. I took what was up for grabs from the Gallos and Profacis. If they needed a car, I got the car. If they wanted some slow-pay or no-pay welsher worked over, I worked him over. If they needed an errand boy, I was their boy. So I lived from hand to mouth. I had the clothes on my back and nothing more. If I went to bed broke I knew I could hustle a buck the next day. I slept on my old lady's chesterfield because her cold water flat had only one bedroom. But I didn't have to worry about the law or the mobs breaking up my sleep."

"So why worry, Maxey?" Fats Magliacca shrugged. "You own a piece of a money-making restaurant in Newark. You have a front man running that motel in Jersey. You lease wires to half the books in town. Your take from the numbers is enough to make you a favorite with the I.R.S. and the Chase Manhattan. You loan to the loan sharks. You've got it made."

"Like hell I have." Max pushed aside his rare steak, after-midnight supper. "My end of that Newark spot is in hock to bondsmen. I've got more assorted punks and stupid henchmen out on bail than the F.B.I. has on its most-wanted list. That motor inn over in Jersey is eating up what comes in from the numbers. You're right about the I.R.S. I'm not only its favorite mark but also its patsy. My accountants and shysters are so damn accurate that I overpay on taxes to stay out of a federal can. Those welshing bookies cost me more in fixes and collections than they're worth. Banking loan sharks used to be good for a grand a day. With the D.A. on my own and their collective asses, it's costing me that much to keep them operating and out of jail. You know what I put out a week to lawyers? For fixes? For protection? For operating costs? For muscle? And for a mob of so-called henchmen, lieutenants, runners, satchel men, and all the other gawdamn leeches that I'm told are on my payrolls? You know what this hotel suite costs? You know what it costs to keep up that baronial hall out on Long Island? That duplex apartment in the fifties that Marie calls her pad? That winter home at Pasa Grille? I've learned how to make it fast, Fats, but I've never learned how to hang on to it. I'm so far out on a financial limb that I'm ready to jump off before I fall with the limb. My mouthpiece tells me I'm 'over-extended' and he charges me a grand a week to tell me what I already know. The rackets used to be a matter of moxey and muscle. Today they're like operating General Motors from one desk without a board of directors. I spend half my time with attorneys and accountants. They keep telling me to get into more legitimate operations but they don't tell me how to make those fronts profitable. Those shysters and pencil pushers think illegitimate operations are like oil wells—that they just keep on pumpin cash."

"Max, what you need is a holiday. You should get away from here for a while. Forget about your headaches."

"Forget, hell, Fats. I'm lucky if I can get to see Marie the odd couple hours before the next day's problems hit me. And that's what I'm going to do right now. Bring the car around to the side door. Let's see if a little love will get the dollar signs from in front of my eyes."

Fats Magliacca, driver, confidant, handyman and bodyguard of

Max Beaver, had reached Uptown Manhattan with Maxey, sharing his rise in the rackets but refusing any share of his power or ambitions. He too was a product of Brooklyn's Red Hook district. Unlike Max Beaver, Fats was content to continue living from one day to the next, whether that living was in the plush East Fifties or back in Red Hook. He eased the convertible to a quiet stop in front of Marie's apartment. "You want I should wait, Max?"

"No. Go back to the hotel. I'll get a cab or have Marie drive me down in the morning. And I'm not in town, Fats—not for anyone!" Max Beaver nodded to the doorman and growled in response to the elevator operator's respectful goodnight greeting. He growled inwardly and smiled when he encountered a continuing after-theater party in Marie's apartment—the Beaver-financed duplex of an ambitious Broadway starlet to whom "showbiz" was a hobby and whose full-time vocation was playing a bedroom role with Max Beaver. The press of the rackets had left him little time lately for Marie's charms

Only a prompt recognition of some of the male guests prevented Max from either walking out or breaking up the party. Two Broadway ticket brokers, a Broadway producer and a West Coast director—the first three who were more than nodding acquaintances of Max Beaver—greeted him with mixed congratulations and polite needling. "Your girl friend has an opportunity to break into Hollywood, Max," the Broadway producer smiled. "I suppose all of us have to make a sacrifice to the arts sooner or later!"

Max had a coating of urbanity and polish that not even a Broadway crowd could crack. "As long as the contract doesn't include me as an angel, I'm delighted to see Marie get a break." The theater crowd saw his affectionate arm around the brunette's shoulder but not his unaffectionate, sarcastic look as he turned to her. "Nice to hear the news, my dear!"

"It's only an offer, Max. I haven't signed a thing. Tell you about it later, darling." She sensed his anger and moved away to mix with guests who were unacquainted with Max.

One of the ticket brokers joined Max at the bar and spoke in a low, confidential murmur. "Speaking of the West Coast, Max, I have some friends coming in from L.A. and Vegas today. They'd like to meet you." He saw the look of disinterest come over Beaver's face and added the names of his friends. "They're Sal Musto and Johnny Tina."

Max showed an interest. "What brings those boys to Manhattan?"

"For the record, Max, they're not here. For your own information, they want to see you. But like your business, Max, their business is

none of my business. I'm just passing on a message."

Musto and Tina were to Los Angeles and Las Vegas what Beaver was to Uptown Manhattan. Max saw them last at the Appalachian fiasco when all three men abandoned Cadillacs and evaded raiding state police by fleeing the mobster convention and crossing fields and streams on foot. "Thanks, Moe," Beaver turned to the ticket broker with neither a smile nor a frown, "I'll be around. Fats will know where I can be reached whenever the boys want to see me. He sipped a highball and wondered what the powerful West Coast combination wanted in New York. Whatever it was, Max Beaver didn't give a damn. He hoped they wanted to buy into his piece of the Manhattan rackets. He saw Marie waving and joined her and the West Coast director.

"Max, darling, this is Herb Wayne. He wants me for his new picture. Isn't that a thrill?"

"It could be, Marie," Max smiled and acknowledged the introduction.

"You two share a nightcap, Maxey, I'm going to help pour some of our departing guests on their way."

"She's a delightful girl, Max, and a talented actress. Of course, this whole offer will depend on a screen test. But her theater experience should make her a natural." Wayne rambled on with enthusiasm. "You know, Max, we seldom get tipped off on a new find and I wouldn't have bothered going to her play if a couple of our backers on the coast hadn't almost pushed me into the trip here."

"Who are her fans?" Beaver laughed.

"A couple casino owners from Las Vegas who were looking around Hollywood for a good investment. They bought into our studio and I just met them last weekend at a Palm Springs party. Musto and Tina. Know them?"

"Not personally," Beaver replied without any indication of his real surprise. "But I know those boys face the same problem we do here, that of continually being on the lookout for a good investment. Hope Marie will contribute to their investment—and your picture." Beaver smoothly expressed his good wishes once more for Wayne's picture and added, "Anything I can do to help the gal out, just call on me. Nice to have met you, Herb." He moved back to the bar and watched in the mirror as Marie said goodnight to the last guest—the Hollywood director.

"I didn't know you were coming up, Maxey," she purred. "You've been neglecting me lately." She drank from Beaver's glass and looked demurely up at him.

"I'm damn glad you didn't know I was coming up here tonight, Marie. Otherwise this party might not have been on the level. I picked up a message from one guest and

some information from another that can spell out trouble or something interesting for me. From what I learned, it almost seems it was staged just for my benefit."

"Don't be so mysterious, darling. What gives?"

"Just business, baby. Maybe nothing more than a coincidence. I'll find out tomorrow. What's with this Hollywood offer?"

"It's as mysterious as you are, Maxey. Wayne came backstage with Moe, the ticket broker, after the play. Mae introduced him and that's all. He said I was just the girl he was looking for—some supporting role. I'd love it, Maxey. But you know the role I'm really interested in, darling." She nibbled at a Beaver earlobe in a display that left no doubt of the role she wanted most to play. "Let's go to bed, darling."

The next morning was bedlam for Max Beaver. Two bookies working for him were arraigned and held under bonds. In reply to his bondsman's "Do I spring them?" he snarled, "That's what you get paid for." When his attorney complained that he couldn't be in two courts at the same time, Beaver growled, "That's your problem." When Fats Magliacca advised the take from the numbers was falling off, he screamed at him, "Isn't there anyone around here with good news." Fats ignored the outburst and went on, "Moe called. Says his two friends are in town. Wants you to call."

"Tell Moe I'll be out at my place on Long Island this afternoon—around four. I know who his friends are, Fats. And keep this meet under cover. I'll want you to drive me out." Max Beaver put in a hectic day. He pulled strings with political fixers; threatened, cajoled and ordered henchmen and bookies; straightened out lieutenants in the numbers game who lazily complained some runners were getting out of hand; argued with bondsmen who felt some hoods Max wanted out on bond were "Bad risks"; and ended the day around three with attorneys and accountants who told him "things were in a bad way all over town." One attorney summed it up, "You've heat from every direction, Max, from Albany, from the D.A. here in town, and from Washington."

"Tell me something I don't already know," he shot back at the attorney. "I'll see you people tomorrow." Max didn't talk as Fats drove to Long Island. His thoughts went back and forth from his Manhattan headaches to what Musto and Tina wanted. As the guard at highway gates of the Beaver Long Island estate let Magliacca drive into the landscaped entrance, Max grunted to himself, "That pair didn't leave the coast for a holiday."

Tina and Musto wasted no time on preliminaries when they were alone with Beaver behind closed doors of his library. "Can we talk in here?" Sal Musto asked.

"It's bug-proof, Sal," Beaver assured him. "What brings you boys here?"

Both Musto and Tina rejected with thanks Beaver's offer of a drink. They settled in deep leather armchairs, close together. In spite of Beaver's assurance that his library was perfectly safe from any electronic listening device, all three men carried on their conversation in coarse whispers, as if trying to prevent even books on floor to ceiling shelves from overhearing.

Johnny Tina spoke first. Sal Musto nodded in agreement. Max Beaver smoked a long Havana and listened without comment. "We're on our way to Washington, Max, for a committee hearing. The only statements the Senators will hear from us will be a continuing recitation of the Fifth. We're not afraid of any federal indictments. And we don't give a damn for any Senatee committee. But a lot of local heat is adding up on the coast. Attorney generals in California and Nevada are snooping more and more. The law in L.A. is putting us to bed and getting us up every day. Our take out there is good—maybe too good—but we feel the pressure closing in, more and more all the time." Tina went on to explain in detail how law enforcement agencies were making concerted efforts to find some way of indicting him and Musto. He detailed their gambling and racketeering operations on the coast and in Nevada.

Sal Musto interrupted. "So we figured we'd talk with you, Max. Word's around that you've your own problems here in the East. Maybe you could pass on to us how you iron out the kind of heat we're facing."

Max Beaver laughed and repeated his invitation for a drink. "Let's keep our cards on the table, Sal. When you boys want advice you do what I do—go to an attorney. When we want help we approach each other—some times. You don't want advice or counsel from me. And I don't think you need my help—in the form of either money or muscle. What's your pitch, Johnny?"

Musto and Tina joined Beaver at the library's portable bar and laughed at his frank declaration and questioning. Musto replied instead of Johnny Tina. "You always were fast on the draw, Max, and I told Johnny you'd see through this pitch fast."

"Like I saw through that director's offer to my girl for a big deal role in some new movie in Hollywood. What did you have in mind when you put the movie mogul up to that one, Sal?"

The portly Sicilian laughed again. "That was Johnny's idea too, Max. We heard you were pretty far gone on that hoofer. We didn't know how far. We also heard you were pretty far out on a limb here in New York. How far we didn't know. Word gets around in the rackets, Max. We hear you have

troubles of your own here. Like maybe some of our own on the coast."

"I'll spell it out to you, Max," Johnny Tina interrupted. "You got all kinds of heat on you here; you need refinancing; your rackets need overhauling. We got all kinds of heat on ourselves out on the coast. But we don't have any financial problems. Our operations are in good shape financially. They don't need any kind of an overhaul. Could be you can help us and we can help you. We move in here; take over your operations; pump in the financing that's needed. You take over for us on the West Coast. Maybe we can make some kind of a financial deal. It could be worked out with a few days' talking over. There's no heat on us here. The law on the coast never heard of you. We move in here. You take over out there. As I say, there'd be a lot of loose ends to tie up. We take over your legitimate operations here in exchange for an equal amount of our operations out west. We take over your rackets in Manhattan. You take over from us in L.A. and Vegas."

"Like Johnny says, Max," Musto interrupted, "it's a suggestion."

"We've already built up part of a front for you in L.A.," Tina continued. "Your girlfriend gets a part in the movies; you get a piece of the studio—our interests in it."

"You boys think of everything," Beaver smiled. "Tell me what you had in mind if I didn't want any part of the switch. You didn't really think I'd take a powder from Manhattan just to chase a skirt all the way to Hollywood. Did you?"

"Maybe some of the advice we got from friends here wasn't exactly correct, Max," Tina smiled. "But we tried not to overlook any bets."

"I wonder just how much snooping you characters have really done into my affairs," Beaver remarked without showing either anger or humor. "Maybe your attorneys on the coast are correspondents of my own mouthpiece's firm here. Could be the counsel I've been getting lately—to get into other interests fast—originated from your birds!"

"We didn't go quite that far, Max," Musto laughed. "Why don't you toss our proposition over in your mind while we're in Washington? If you can see any benefit in the deal for yourself, we can talk abou it more when we get finished in Washington. If you don't we can forget about it."

"You know," Max Beaver whispered, "some other people would be concerned with such a switch. I'm not the most powerful of *our friends* here in the east. And you boys are not the only one interested in what goes on out west. I admit I'm pressed the same way you are. I even admit I've a few money problems that need straightening out here. But I know, and you know, unless we have the blessings of *our friends*, we'd be dreaming or wast-

ing time in even discussing this kind of move."

"*Our friends* will give their blessing to any kind of move that removes heat from the rackets or from their own interests, Max," Musto replied with the same awesome-like seriousness every time he used the Cosa Nostra expression.

Tina agreed. "*Their* agreement alone would make a switch possible."

"Let's see how you boys make out in Washington," Beaver continued. "I'll be watching television and the newspapers. Call me when you get through with the committee. We can talk some more and see what could be worked out. For the time being, all this is between ourselves. I'll think about the deal before I hear from you again. If we can reach a preliminary agreement, than we can see what *our friends* have to say."

Beaver walked with the West Coast Sicilians to Moe's waiting sedan in the driveway. "Nice having talked with you, Sal—Johnny. Have a good trip."

"The talk with you was good, Max," Musto scowled. Then he laughed, "There will be little *talk* on this trip!" Moe and Fats knew only of the meeting and nothing of its discussion.

Smiles and farewells from Musto and Tina left only an impression that it had been a friendly conference among high levels of Mafia Dons.

Max Beaver took no one into his confidence as he moved quickly during the following three days. With a few discrete long distance calls to Los Angeles, he confirmed the positions of Sal Musto and Johnny Tina. Pressure on them was growing from local, state and federal levels. Their "outside" interests, within the law, were investments in Vegas casinos, a movie studio, two motels and a Sunset Strip restaurant. Other operations in Los Angeles County were similar to his own in Manhattan. There was no undue pressure on them from rival mobs and no concerted news media campaigns against the rackets. The heat centered on the individuals—Musto and Tina. Max watched the televised Senate Committee in session and smiled as both Musto and Tina pleaded the Fifth and hid behind the now famous constitutional amendment. He called in his own attorneys and accountants.

"If I could clean house and get out, how much would I be worth on paper?" he asked the surprised group. The collective answer amounted to an uncertain sum between seven and eight million. When they asked for an explanation of "getting out", Max cut them short. Put any interpretation on it that you want. You don't have to tell me I can't sell out through a business broker. Just tell me how much I might be able to liquidate if I could turn over my entire opera-

tion. Replies were as vague and hypothetic as his explanation.

One of the accountants summed it up. "Your place on Long Island, if you could pick up that mortgage, would bring a hundred thousand. The motor inn over in Jersey would bring close to three hundred thousand, if you could get the bondsmen to release their claims against it. Your interest in that Newark restaurant is probably worth another hundred thousand, if your partners would permit the sale of your interest. Only you can make a reasonable estimate of what your, er, ah, other business interests might bring."

Max Beaver worked 'til daylight in an effort to place a value on his piece of the loan shark racket, the numbers and the books. It was impossible. He had hundreds of thousands out in unsecured loans to Manhattan loan sharks. Security depended on his ability to enforce payment from the loan sharks and in turn on their musclemen's ability to collect from borrowers. His income from the numbers was dependent on his organization of runners and collectors and his ability to provide them with protection. Payoffs, bribes and protection costs ran high. His income from the books was further complicated. In addition to the same "operating expenses" involved in the numbers he had to pay for the wire service which he in turn leased to local Manhattan bookies. Many figures were known only to Beaver. His payments to *friends* was known only to him. The latter would be understood by Musto and Tina. It was unknown even to his attorneys and accountants. He burned many scraps of notepaper in his fireplace. "Not even the I.R.S. boys could figure it out," he concluded.

Musto and Tina called from Washington. "Is it worth while setting up a meeting?" Tina asked.

"It might be," Beaver encouraged him. "Suppose you check in at my hotel here in Manhattan. It might be less conspicuous than any meet out on Long Island. You could be tailed by the feds. And a meet at some strange hotel or motel could result in some hick shamus recognizing us or our cars. Check in here and get word to me. Let's assume there's a fed tail on you and that they're on top of me. We'll work from there when you get here."

"That sounds good—and careful," Johnny Tina laughed. "We'll call you when we get in town."

Max Beaver played it careful in setting up a meeting place. He wanted a location known ahead of time only to himself. He wanted a location that was neither bugged nor under surveillance. And he wanted it to be in the same Uptown hotel in which he maintained his suite and into which he anticipated Musto and Tina would register. He assumed his telephone was tapped. And he assumed his suite was

bugged. He also assumed Musto and Tina would be tailed to the hotel. If they left the hotel they would be tailed and so would he. Therefore, he reasoned, the meet would have to be in the hotel. He called Marie.

"Fats will pick you up in a few minutes. Bring a girlfriend." He neither explained nor enlarged on his instructions. He turned to Fats Magliacca. "Pick up Marie. She'll have a girlfriend or will want to pick one up. That's OK. Now get this straight and play it like you hear it, Fats. Give Marie's girlfriend a C Note. Tell her to check into a suite here and pay for it in advance—for one day. Get the key from her and hang on to it. Keep the girlfriend in the car. Tell Marie to come up here."

The brunette smiled up at Max Beaver, "What's on your mind, darling?"

"Keep your girlfriend entertained all day and tonight. I want to use that suite she rented and I don't want her or anyone else to know I'm using it. Make sure she doesn't get to anyone. If she does, let me know."

"Your slightest wish, darling. . . . Will I see you tonight?"

"Don't count on it, baby. I might show up. Right now I have some things to look after and some people to see. If anybody wants to know, I'm not around town. Don't forget to keep your friend under wraps 'til I call. It's important."

"Moe called, Maxey," Fats announced an hour later. "Your friends checked in."

"Find out what names they're using. Get to them and let them know the number of that suite. Don't 'phone them. Tell them yourself. Stay with them 'til I get there. Make sure no one—bellman or maid—knows we're making the meet. And I mean no one—not anyone. What's the suite number?"

"1606."

"I'll see you and the boys there—in half-an-hour. Make damn sure no one tails them to the suite, Fats."

Sal Musto and Johnny Tina, like Beaver, assumed, at all times, they were shadowed by either agents from the Department of Justice Organized Crime Section or by state racket squad detectives. They moved accordingly when they wanted to avoid their shadows. Musto left his room and took an elevator to the lobby. He idled at a news stand, made a few purchases, and returned to a different floor. From there he used the stiarway to reach 1606. Tina left his room's floor and walked from the elevator on the fifth floor. From there he went to 1606 by way of a freight elevator operated by Fats Magliacca. Musto and Tina arrived at the rented suite without being seen. Beaver used similar precautions, walking down three flights of the hotel's stairway from the nineteenth floor. When the four men disappeared into the sixteenth floor

suite, their whereabouts was known only to Marie, Beaver's sexpot brunette playmate. She loved life too well to do other than obey Beaver implicitly. Fats Magliacca remained in the suite's living room, wandering casually through its two bedrooms and to the suite's two hall entrances. Blinds were down and drapes closed. Musto, Tina and Beaver closeted themselves in the suite's master bathroom. Before they began to talk, Beaver turned on the shower, the tub and the sink. He let the cold water run undisturbd.

"I use plenty of electronic snoopers myself," he explained. "It's the only way to beat the bugs. Sound waves won't penetrate the sound of running water. I don't think this spot is bugged. I'm not taking any chances." He ran down to Musto and Tina the precautions he had taken in obtaining the suite. "We can talk here." He closed the door of the bathroom and began a crime conference whose conversations would have been invaluable to either law enforcement agencies or rival racketeers on either coast.

"How was the Senate grilling?" Beaver asked.

"Found out more from it than the committee did from us, Max," Tina shrugged.

"Found out what we already knew," Musto joined in, "that we're both hot as hell and too hot to last on the West Coast. Give any thought to our proposition, Max?"

"Yes. If we can get together, and if *our friends* will go along with the idea, I'd buy the switch. But there's a helluva lot of details that would have to be worked out, even if we could reach any kind of an agreement. Will your people work for me? Will my boys work for you? How long can we keep the switch away from the law? From the press? From the mobs? Can I keep your people in line? Can you keep my boys in line? Can you work with my connections? My fixes? Will I be the target of every rival mobster in L.A.? What will your moving in here stir up among a lot of ambitious hoods in this town? And if we can find answers to these questions, what will *our friends* say when we approach them?"

Musto came up with an answer that appealed to Max Beaver. "The whole idea behind this switch Maxey, is to drop a red herring on the trails followed by Uncle Whiskers' snoopers. The way I see it, would be for us to take over here and you to take over on the coast with only our own and your top lieutenants knowing anything about the switch. You could do what you want in L.A. Our idea is to remain behind the scenes here in Manhattan. So we spread a little more of the take around our top boys. By doing so we get pressure from the feds off our own backs."

"I don't know L.A. like you boys do, but I know Manhattan," Beaver

disagreed with Musto, "and nobody can beat the grapevine in this town. If we can work out a deal, we'll be lucky to keep it under cover while we're working it out. And as soon as it gets out among our own people, it'll be picked up by some snooping columnist. And the law will be on top of it at the same time. About the best we'll be able to do will be to move in and take over before the wrong people learn too much of what we're doing."

"As Sal says, Max, do it your way out west. We'll handle it our way here. Let's talk about trades. What kind of a take are you getting from the numbers?"

The exchange of figures, daily incomes, expenses, payoffs, operating costs and the nut of crime and vice began. The three vice entrepreneurs spent eight hours in the tiled room comparing notes of racket operations and profits. "Let's face it, Max," Johnny Tina finally reached a conclusion. "We're trading down. You're trading up. There isn't a helluva lot of difference in your take from numbers, books and the loan sharks between our own in L.A. But your nut is a lot higher. You've got everybody except the police commissioner and mayor on your payroll. You put out a lot of money for bondsmen. We have a front operating our own bail bond agency and we show a profit from it. You settle for interest from loan sharks. We get the interest from the borrowers themselves by keeping the loan sharks in line and on a payroll. All you're getting from the loan rackets is a middle man's take. We rake the big take off the top and bottom. You've more coming in from the numbers than we have but you put out more for protection and fixes in a day than we do in a week. Your books are like your loan sharks—you're a middle man controlling a service. The way we see a bookie is that he's our man—working for us all the way instead of just paying for a wire service."

"You could be right, Johnny." Max Beaver saw no point in telling either Musto or Tina that Manhattan wasn't Los Angeles. "Do it your way—when it's your back yard."

They reached a tentative agreement after eight hours of haggling. Max Beaver got a piece of a Vegas casino and the Musto-Tina interest in a Hollywood studio. Musto and Tina were to take over Beaver's Jersey motel and his end of the Newark restaurant. Beaver's control of Manhattan books, numbers and loan sharks went to Musto and Tina. The West Coast books, numbers and loan sharks went to Beaver, with an understanding that Musto and Tina would pick up a third of the profits for a year. Beaver's Long Island residence and Florida winter home were exchanged for a Beverly Hills house and a Laguna Beach house.

"We can fix up the paper work

with our attorneys when we learn how *our friends* will react to this whole deal," Beaver suggested.

"When do we get together?" Musto asked. "Johnny and I can't hang around this town too long."

"I'll get word to Tony in Chicago tonight. He'll tell us when and where a meet can be set up. I'll send Fats to you. Let's get out of here. That damn water's making me deaf."

No one reached Anthony Moduretti in Chicago by telephone. And the few that did reach him were the known and trusted of the *Cosa Nostra.* Elder statesman of the *omerta,* Moduretti had carefully cultivated a role of social and business respectability during the last twenty-five years. Having attained, in the eyes of the uninitiated, this pseudo status, he exercised hyper caution in protecting it. Part of that caution included an aversion to telephones. He hadn't been arrested in the last quarter century. In the twenties and thirties, thirty-two arrests resulted in not one conviction and only three court appearances. He had learned early to be careful. In three appearances before senate investigation committees he performed as anticipated and plead the Fifth. He underwent the embarrassment of listening to his own recorded voice from a tapped telephone conversation—and denied that it was his voice. The next day he called his broker and ordered him to sell his AT&T stock. From that day on he wouldn't even use a hotel telephone to order from room service. Max Beaver had difficulties setting up the necessary meeting for himself, Musto and Tina.

He placed a long distance call to a Loop travel agency. Moduretti's son, the proprietor, wasn't in. "Ask him to call collect." Beaver identified himself as the Jersey motel manager whose office he used for clandestine meetings and telephone calls. I'll wait."

Moduretti junior recognized the New Jersey telephone number and called back. He knew Beaver's voice and understood his request, a seemingly innocent one and routine business for a Chicago travel agency.

"A lodge or cottage would be best—reservation for three—any Lake Michigan resort not too far north of the city—for a business conference," Beaver requested. He learned Moduretti would be available only on Wednesday when his son replied.

"The best I can do, from my listings, is Wednesday. Would that do? I think it's the sort of thing you'd like."

If the call were monitored at either end, the monitor would learn only that a routine reservation had been made at a Lake Michigan resort for a manger of a New Jersey motel. The name of the resort was not mentioned in the call. Names of the three guests were fictitious. But Beaver knew the resort to which

Moduretti junior referred. Located on a tiny Lake Michigan island, it could be reached only by seaplane or boat. Its carefully screened clientele arrived there only when reservations were accepted by the travel agency. Beaver, Musto and Tina arrived by chartered seaplane. Moduretti senior and two *friends* arrived from Chicago by cruiser. The seaplane's pilot was lodged at one end of the island, his passengers at a swank stone cottage at the opposite end. The Moduretti trio was in an adjacent cottage. Not even a servant observed or overheard the meeting. No introductions were necessary and few introductory pleasantries were observed.

"We did well in Washington," Johnny Tina remarked with deference to the three elders.

"No one does well in Washington," Moduretti observed in a quiet, excited Sicilian dialect. "The fact that one's presence is ordered in front of one of those hearings shows that one is not doing well. The only point on which I agree with snooping Senate committees is that both of you—or any of *our friends* who appears in front of the committee—ought to be deported. Every time one of us is exposed by the committee spotlight of publicity we are weakened. We retain our power in the dark. We lose it when that spotlight seeks out any one of us." Moduretti's voice lowered to a coarse whisper and his language change to guttural English. "So, Sal and Johnny, like hell you did well in Washington!"

Musto and Tina felt they were so far up in the *Cosa Nostra* hierarchy that they were beyond the kiss or white flower. They had meticulously observed the *omerta* code in Washington and in that observance assumed their strength among *friends*. "Remember, Tony? I once accompanied you to Washington when you sat in that same witness chair, in the same room, and gave the same answers," Musto brashly reminded him.

"And it has taken me many years to live down that trip," Moduretti continued to whisper. "I hope you and Johnny can live down your trip—or even live—for the same length of time. Now, what has brought you here?"

"This was my idea, Tony," Beaver spoke for the first time. "We seek your counsel, Tony." Moduretti and his two fellow Mafia Dons listened as Beaver summed up his position in Manhattan and that of Musto and Tina in Los Angeles and Nevada.

"All that I know, Max," Moduretti interrupted. "Do you want me to wave a magic wand on a problem whose solution lies with you people?"

"We have an answer," Johnny Tina spoke up. "We ask your counsel and advice." He explained without interruption the proposed switch, its many ramifications and involvements and the ways he,

Musto and Beaver had discussed to overcome them. Moduretti raised new questions.

"Over the years, Max, you have made your own connections with local, state and federal politicians. The favors they do for you are done under duress. In one way or another you hold a club over their heads. It could be anything—from information to a second mortgage—and these people live in continuing fear of exposure. They live in fear and only that fear keeps them of value to you. The higher they rise politically or socially, the more they seek to throw off the influence you are able to exercise over them. If you move to the West Coast, do you think you could hand on that power to Sal and Johnny. By the same token, do you think you could take over from Sal or Johnny even a deputy sheriff they have in their pockets? What happens when a lot of your boys get big ideas when news gets out that you're no longer the man to see? How long do you think you could handle a Hollywood bookie when he learns Sal or Johnny are no longer around? You think you can muscle all these people? If you do, get the thought out of your heads. Every time you leave a stiff in a car trunk you turn loose a flood of editorial guns that are more deadly to us than slugs from a sub-machine gun on North Clark Street. Spell out to me how you'll overcome these problems and I may go along with you."

Beaver, Musto and Tina spelled them out. Fix for fix, connection for connection, they detailed to Moduretti how the switch could be made without undue loss of power; how Beaver's control of Los Angeles rackets would be known to only a few trusted lieutenants; and how that of Musto and Tina in Manhattan would be known only to key hoods left behind by Beaver.

"All of you speak for those you know," Moduretti sighed. "If you know them as you think you do, the plan might just work. If, as you insist, you can remain farther behind the scenes, your thinking is good. The day is coming when more of us will have to move as I do—completely in the background. I can afford to gamble some of my interests in New York and Los Angeles. You're gambling your entire operations. But," he turned to Beaver, "one of my interests on the West Coast was not revealed to you by Sal or Johnny. If you agree to this switch, you'll look after it. Dine with me tonight, Max. If you have completed plans with Sal and Johnny, I'll discuss it with you then." Moduretti walked with his taciturn friends to his own cottage, casually and outwardly unconcerned. He might have finished discussing a legitimate real estate transaction as far as his expression and appearance seemed to the servants.

"What the hell did he mean?" Beaver turned to Musto when the three elder Dons had left.

"You heard him, Max. It's a deal about which he and he alone talks. It's a money-maker. You'll get it from him, if he wants to run it down to you. We don't talk about it. And you won't talk about it, Max—ever."

Max Beaver and Anthony walked together on a darkened beach after midnight. Sentinel-like figures watched over them from the stone cottages. Crashing waves from Lake Michigan drowned out any sound of their low voices. Moduretti explained to Beaver the unmentioned interest of the Mafia patriarch. "Of this operation, Max, you will speak to no one. Not to any of *our friends*. Not to Musto or Tina. You and I alone—no others—will know of this. Income-wise, your other operations will seem trivial in comparison. Musto and Tina have grown fat, careless only in their other rackets. So careless that federal investigators succeeded in ferreting out their activities. But they did not dig into this operation—or neither Musto nor Tina would have reached Washington. Now they want out. But, Max, from this operation, there is no out. You will learn from them what you must of their West Coast set-up. You will establish your connections with those they can hand on to you. Then you will return to Manhattan with Musto and Tina, purportedly to complete the Manhattan end of the proposed switch. It will not be as Musto and Tina anticipate. It will be the kiss of death for them. They will not be heard of again, Max. How they will disappear will depend on you. But they will disappear."

Max Beaver listened to the execution order without comment. He thought not of the fate Moduretti and his two fellow elders had decreed for Musto and Tina but of his personal predicament. He recalled a warning piece of advice he had once received from his own, deceased Sicilian father, "stay outside the inner council; the closer you get to the top, the closer you get to hell!" He wondered if he was following in the doomed footsteps of Musto and Tina. Moduretti's pressure, from a thin, deceptively powerful, bony hand, on Beaver's upper arm, brought his thoughts back to the elder's words.

"When Lucky was returned to the old country, we agreed narcotics were too hot to handle. Shipments from Europe, the Near and Middle East, and from Central America were being—and still are—followed from border to border while Interpol and other assorted national and international police agencies worked—and are still working—to put down heroin and opium traffic. I agreed, with others among *our friends,* to get out of that particular traffic. The next summer I visited a friend in Hong Kong and learned of a new and different source. As a result of that visit, I deposited three million dol-

lars in Hong Kong and Swiss banks. I've never returned to Hong Kong but the operation I financed there continues today. It was at that time I offered to Musto and Tina control of what came from that source. They were told, like you will be told now, of that operation and my interest in it. And they were also told that knowledge would prohibit them from ever getting out of the operation. The money they've piled up from their participation in that operation gave them a delusion of power. They dream they can walk away from it with a knowledge of my interest in that traffic." Moduretti stopped to light a cigar in the shelter of Beaver's cupped hands.

"Don't ever indulge in such dreams, Max." Moduretti went on to explain the drug traffic he had bought into in Southeast Asia. "My Hong Kong friend told me of an ancient 'Chain of the Elephant' range of coastal mountains over which a trail led to Cambodian jungles and down to the Mekong River. Along that trail, for centuries, opium flowed from southeast Asia countries which professed to forbid the traffic. But the people and rulers of those countries had to have the opium for personal use and the income from its sale and export. All I did was modernize that traffic, corner its export and set up Hong Kong refineries to provide morphine or heroin for the U.S. market. I provided the capital. My friend in Hong Kong did the rest. I had to have a trusted *friend* in this country to control distribution. Musto and Tina were ideal—until they grew lazy-fat from profits." Moduretti spat as if getting rid of the West Coast pair was as easy as his physical act.

"I financed the organization which my Hong Kong friend set up. On a single flight from the Laotian capital of Vientiane down to Vietnam or Cambodia, I can fly as much opium as once came over the Chain of the Elephant in a month. A fleet of fishing trawlers operating in the Gulf of Siam picks up the stuff in waterproof tins and lands it on the Malayan coast. From there it goes to Penang where it is trans-shipped in many disguises to Hong Kong. The H and M eventually reach our West Coast in a dozen different forms of camouflaged freight." Moduretti threw his cigar butt into black waters of the lake.

"I set up a foolproof operation for Musto and Tina. Not at any time would any of *our friends* or their people touch or even be in a building where the stuff was. When any trafficker, even a kilo-man, was knocked off there would be no way in which he could be traced to Musto or Tina. And they kept the heat on the flow of H from Central America by setting up a patsy to be knocked off by Treasury Agents whenever the law or press asked where the stuff was

coming from. When seizures were analyzed, lab reports were always the same—'of Mexican or Central American origin'. Remember one thing, Max—never let any of your own people handle the stuff, at any time. Use the fronts Musto and Tina have established. Trust no one. Never attempt to participate in or control the retail traffic in this country. Your operation is confined strictly to financing the import traffic. All the stuff that reaches even your Manhattan peddlers now comes from Musto and Tina. Have you ever had any idea that *our friends* had a knowledge of this traffic?"

"Hell, no, Tony. I've gone along with everyone else in the agreement that any narcotics deal on this continent is too hot to handle."

"Keep it that way, Max, and you'll last."

"If Sal and Johnny don't take over in Manhattan, who looks after my interests there, Tony? I can't just move out and let it run by itself."

"I've talked that over with Joseph and Oddo. They can wipe the olive oil from their hands long enough to keep people in line Uptown. They've always wanted to move in on you. Now we'll let them buy into you. They know your boys. Your boys know them. Both Joe and Oddo have their ready-made connections in all the boroughs. Go to the coast with Sal and Johnny. Meet their people. Take over. I'll be in New York in a week. We'll set up a meeting on a friend's yacht off the coast. First we'll confer with Sal and Johnny. When they're out of the way we'll work out a plan for Joe and Oddo to take over. In the meantime Joe and Oddo know you'll be out of town. They'll refrain from menacing your operations in Manhattan and will keep anyone else from muscling in while you're away. I'll look forward to seeing you when you get back from Los Angeles."

"Fats will go stark, raving mad," Beaver laughed as he walked to his own cottage and Moduretti returned to his waiting friends. "He gets along with Joe and Oddo like he does with a Red Hook harness bull." And Magliacca did rave when Joe and Oddo walked into the Beaver hotel suite with congenial smiles. With a knowledge of their long enmity with Beaver, he first suspected the Downtown pair had a rub-out in mind. He accepted their reassurance with suspicion and their offers of help only when a bookie in the West Forties rebelled. Joe and Oddo kept the rebel in line with a curt order, "You keep on using Max's service 'til he says different—or else!" It was too much for Fats who waited for some sign from Joe and Oddo that they had designs on Beaver's rackets. While he waited he kept three hoods on tap with orders to gun down both Joe and Oddo if he

were so much as seen being escorted into one of their cars. His suspicions ebbed only a little when an unexplained message arrived from Marie. "Max says to tell you he'll be back in a weeek and that you'll have no problems between now and then."

"What the hell does he mean. All I got is problems, including Joe and Oddo."

"That's all he had to say, Fats. I'm like you. All I do is wait for the big lug," the brunette complained. "But I do like he says."

In Los Angeles, Beaver was too busy with Musto and Tina to worry about problems in New York. At secret after-midnight meetings in the Laguna Beach house, at the Beverly Hills home of Musto, at Palm Springs, at Vegas and even in the office of a Lake Tahoe casino, he met lieutenants of Musto and Tina. The word handed on, "Max will take over," from Musto and Tina, was accompanied with the first order from Beaver, "And I'll stay in the dark. Handle your own boys. If you have troubles, bring them to me yourself. Don't send anyone, at any time." To ensure obedience of this command to the letter he offered an enticement—more money—and including a warning—"The first time word gets around that I've taken over out here, word will follow that you're out, out cold!"

In a three-room suite of the Mapes hotel in Reno, Musto and Tina introduced him to a Vegas casino manager. When they introduced Beaver and explained the sale of their interests to him, Max Beaver expressed the same desire for anonymity. "I'll be a silent partner. And if any other partners don't like the idea, let me know. I'll buy them out."

At Tina's Palm Springs cottage, Beaver surprised Musto and Tina. "Moduretti made some extra capital available for me. If you don't plan on being out here much, why not sell this place to me; also those two L.A. motels and that Sunset Strip restaurant. If you're getting out, you might as well get out all the way."

"If you can come up with the cash, Max, I'll sell," Tina agreed.

"That goes for me too," Musto added.

"I have the cash. Have your attorneys draw up the papers and sign them. Bring them along to New York. I'll hand you the cash when you hand over the deeds and exchange my own New York and Jersey properties for your piece in that casino, the studio stock and the houses at the Beach and in Beverly Hills. I'll have all my papers ready. You have your own completed. I'll meet your price in cash."

"The old man must have made a bundle available for you, Max," Musto smiled with mixed greed and envy.

"He did," was Beaver's only comment.

In the Palm Springs cottage, Beaver met attorneys, accountants and businessmen acquaintances of Musto and Tina. The introductions were more polished and Beaver's acknowledgments more socially correct. "I'm sure we can work together," he assured the former Musto-Tina front men. He made arrangements to meet individually with them at later dates to discuss business arrangements. And he dropped hints that even more profitable agreements could be worked out, while adding that added profits would spring from a clear understanding that his West Coast operations, legal in this case, should remain undercover. To attorneys he was even more blunt. "I'll increase your retainers in return for your counsel—and keep them up as long as you keep me out of sight with your legal blinds." They understood and agreed.

In a four-engine Constellation, owned by the Vegas casino, Beaver met the few buyers who had dealt with Musto and Tina in the narcotics traffic. The buyers came aboard one-at-a-time at different West Coast cities and were told by Musto and Tina that Beaver was now "the man". Each flight picked up only one buyer and ended before another, in another city, was picked up. And each flight went to Vegas; landed; and flew back to the city from which it originated. Interested observers saw only routine flights of a casino plane, providing complimentary passages for casino guests. At the end of the week, Beaver's face expressed fatigue from the continuing series of meetings and lack of sleep. He slept all the way to Manhattan on the transcontinental flight by a domestic airliner. Musto and Tina travelled to New York by a different flight on a different airline.

"You look like you've been in bed for a week with a Hollywood nympho, darling," Marie accused when she let Beaver away from her suggestive pressure and overheated kiss.

"When I get through with what I still have to do in the next week," Beaver growled, "I'll go to bed with you for a week, baby, and find out what kind of a nympho you are. And I'll be too busy to see you. Be ready to move out of this town on Wednesday. We're moving to the coast. Like that?"

"Love it, Maxey, as long as you're calling the move."

"And for those who want to know, Marie, it's just a holiday for me, seeing you launched on your Hollywood career. For the snoopers, I'm retiring—getting out of the rackets. Play it that way, right down the line. Max will look after shipping your things."

Two nights later, Max Beaver, noted the effectiveness of Broadway gossip when Fats Magliacca pointed out a Broadway columnist's remark, "Is it love or money that motivates the move west of a

local Mister B from Manhattan's crime-society set? Whether he's retiring with his ill-gotten gain or merely chasing an ill-advised but potential starlet to Hollywood, we go along with the D.A.'s office in wishing more of his kind would go west to live—west of Los Angeles harbor."

On that same night, Max Beaver moved in his own cruiser up Long Island Sound 'til he spotted a sixty-foot yacht owned by a Brooklyn olive oil importer. Fats Magliacca pulled alongside the yacht long enough for Beaver to climb aboard. "Keep in sight, Fats," Beaver called to him as he was helped aboard the yacht.

In a luxurious cabin he met Anthony Moduretti, the same two Chicago Sicilians who had been with him on the Lake Michigan island, Sal Musto and Johnny Tina. Before entering the cabin he recognized two crew members. They were hoods he had seen with Joe and Oddo.

"Sal and Johnny tell me you are established on the coast, Max. Any problems?"

"Not any out there, Tony. And there shouldn't be any here. I can introduce Sal and Johnny around here. All that remains is for me to clean up some paper work with them." He smiled at the two West Coast *friends*.

"Suppose you see to your papers. Then we'll dine and talk."

Beaver examined a brief case full of deeds and documents produced by Musto while Musto and Tina looked over papers carried on board by Beaver. "Looks complete to me," Beaver shrugged. "Those alright?" he asked pointing to the ones he had handed over.

"To me, they do," Tina replied. "We'll have our New York attorneys look them over tomorrow.

"That's good enough for me. And I'll have the cash in your attorneys' office." He noted Musto and Tina had signed their papers and that they bore the appropriate seals from Los Angeles and other counties in California and Nevada. "Keep all of this stuff together, Sal. I'll take delivery of your papers tomorrow as we agreed—when I deliver the cash." Musto replaced the packets of West Coast documents with those Beaver handed over in the brief case. Beaver noted the case was left on a bulkhead shelf in the cabin.

"What brings Moduretti here, Max?" Tina asked.

"I think he wants to get you boys straight with Joe and Oddo; see that you have their cooperation rather than, like I did, their ambitions to move in on me. You lease your wire service from Tony and rent it out to local bookies. He doesn't want any local competition. And I suppose he wants to sit in on our final agreement. After all, he is still interested in both ends of this switch. And you know the old man—he likes to do things up right

with an old fashioned wining and dining to celebrate any sort of a deal. Tony's all for the banquetting ceremonials to mark any change in *our thing,* from the birth of a grandson to a kiss of death for a son who forgot the *omerta."* Musto and Tina joined in Beaver's laughter.

Anthony Moduretti gave no indication that his formal dinner aboard the yacht was other than an expression of continuing close *Cosa Nostra* ties. He indulged in small talk and reminiscences of the old days. Waiters moved silently with course after course while the six Sicilians toasted him and the old days in cut glass goblets. Rainbow colors flickered on the white table cloth from rich Italian wines. Moduretti traced his relationship with Musto and Tina, from days when he had worked, with their fathers, for Capone in Cicero. At no time did he mention the narcotics traffic. He compared the rough, tough, violent bootlegging days of the Prohibition era to the suave gambling rackets of the sixties. He compared crude bribery of politicians in the twenties to arranged fixes by attorneys who fronted for mob interests of the sixties. "Life changes; we change with it in our operations," he sighed. "Only rarely is it still necessary to drop a white carnation from a lapel to a finger bowl. The kiss of death has become a symbol of considered execution seldom used." He looked at no one and seemed to speak to a framed oil painting on the cabin's panelled mahogany wall. His voice lowered. He philosophied. He turned to Musto. "Can you recall, in your lifetime, Sal, anyone who violated the *omerta* on this continent?"

"No," he paused, "only Valachi whose time runs out."

"You, Johnny?" the Mafia patriarch smiled almost fatherly.

"No. *Our friends* behave like we did in Washington—like you too did, Tony, when it was your turn to face the Committee. I think you were among the first of their targets, weren't you?"

Moduretti ignored the question. He smiled. He looked from Musto to Tina. "And no one wants *out* anymore, from *our thing,* or from our personal contracts." Before anyone could comment, Anthony Moduretti rose and lifted his glass. He spoke in Sicilian. "To *our friends."* He looked at no one as he turned to walk from the cabin. He stopped by Musto first and kissed him on each cheek. No one spoke. He paused to confer the same kiss of death on Tina. His two followers from Chicago dropped white carnations from their lapels into finger bowls of gleaming silver in front of Musto and Tina. As they left the yacht's master cabin, three servants entered. Max Beaver recognized them as hoods from the Downtown mobs of Joe and Oddo. The three made no effort to remove anything from the table.

"Why?" Musto asked.

"You damn fool, Sal!" Tina whispered in a dry, raspy voice. "You know why. Did you think we could ever walk away from that junk racket. . . ."

"That's enough, Johnny!" Beaver broke in before Tina could say more.

"And you, Max," Musto screamed as he realized Beaver was the appointed executioner. "You knew all this when you were ironing out this deal with us last week." He lunged for the brief case but fell short of the shelf when one of the "servants" chopped him to the floor with a vicious, thudding slap of a thirty-eight on the side of his head.

Tina's reaction was verbal rather than physical. "Some day, Max, I'll come back from hell to watch you get the same. Just remember that." He broke into a string of Sicilian oaths while one of the hoods pushed him out of the cabin. The other two dragged Musto's unconscious body to the deck. There was no sign of Moduretti.

Beaver moved to the pilot house. "Flash a light back at my cruiser," he ordered the yacht's captain. "When it pulls up, I have some things to throw aboard the cruiser." Tina never knew what hit him. Beaver approached him as he looked over the dark waters of Long Island Sound. He brought a gun butt down on Tina's head with a long, overhead swing.

Fats Magliacca spotted the yacht's signal and overtook it. One the hoods caught the line he threw. The yacht's engines stopped and the cruiser tied up to its starboard stern.

"Go below," Beaver turned to the three hoods. He wanted no witnesses and no listeners. He dropped the bodies of Musto and Tina on to the cruiser's deck. "Not in the Sound, Fats. Clear out into the open sea before you dump them." He looked from the dark stern deck of the yacht to the pilot house and cabin. If his act was observed, it was only by those who would deny forever the observation. "Make sure they don't come to before you dump them. I'll see you in the morning. OK?"

"OK, Max. Cast off that line."

Beaver remained at the stern of the yacht and watched the cruiser's lights disappear in the night. He thought he heard the sound of two shots. But it could have been an engine's backfire. When the yacht picked up speed, he walked along the deck to the cabin. Moduretti and his Chicago friends were smoking quietly in the lounge. A servant brought the Musto brief case to the lounge. "I'll look after that," Beaver thanked him.

"And look after things in Los Angeles, Max," Moduretti observed quietly. He picked up the ship's phone and called the pilot house. "Would you ask Joe and Oddo to step into the cabin?" he asked the

yacht captain as if he were ordering a round of drinks in a club bar.

The two swarthy brothers walked the few steps from an adjoining cabin and grinned at Max Beaver. "Nice to have you aboard, Max."

"Under any other circumstances," Beaver grinned back at his two long-time enemies, "I'd jump overboard and swim for it. No one in the old Red Hook neighborhood would ever believe we'd share a yacht cabin, or even a street corner, without shooting at each other."

Moduretti prevented the meeting from approaching any return to old animosities or rivalries. "*Our thing* has a way of making unions and ending strife. I have talked with you," he turned to Joe and Oddo, "and I have talked with Max. You have looked, for years, at the Uptown territory. Look no more. Meet the price Max places on it and take it." The white-haired Sicilian turned to Beaver. "You have no need to haggle, Max." He pointed to the brief case. "You have done well in one deal tonight."

Beaver talked quietly with the two brothers. Moduretti and his two friends smoked quietly, ignored the Manhattan discussion, and talked of a landscaped garden Moduretti's wife planned for his suburban Chicago estate. His only problem was his wife's objection to a stone wall running along the highway edge of the estate. "She can have her garden, as long as that wall remains," he concluded with laughter.

The three New York *Mafiosi* reached an agreement before the yacht tied up at a private dock on the North Shore. Moduretti and his two always present but silent friends walked to a waiting car. Beaver accompanied him. "Bank ninety percent of the take on those imports for me, Max. Your ten per cent will add a million a year to your own income. I have faith in you—like I once had in our friends." He pointed a gloved hand out over the waters.

Max Beaver turned down all invitations to party before leaving New York. "I'm satisfied we could reach an agreement," he told Joe and Oddo when they suggested a Long Island celebration, including their own and Beaver's Manhattan lietenants, to mark their takeover of Manhattan rackets. "The right people know you have my support. And the fewer who learn of my departure; the better I'll like it. For the record, I'm out of the rackets." When Marie announced a farewell party for her theater friends, Beaver saw a value in it. "Have a ball, baby, and go all out. I'll foot the bill but I won't be there. And the more you let the word drop among that Broadway crowd that I'm out of the rackets and out of this town for good, the better I'll like it. Party all night if you want. I'll be at the hotel—asleep. Just be at the airport

in the morning. Fats will pick you up. We're flying in a private plane—and your friends are not invited to see you off." Beaver had already found much of value in owning fifty-one per cent of his Vegas casino stock. He could command its private plane for his own flights.

On the coast, Beaver patterned his life, legal and illegal, after that of Moduretti. He could be reached only through his top lieutenants and attorneys. He spent more time at Laguna Beach in his cliffside beach house, in his Palm Springs cottage, and at his Beverly Hills residence than he did in the city. He was rarely seen in Vegas. He stayed away from the celebrity spots. He was a mystery man even to those who answered to him. He met with contacts in the narcotics traffic only aboard the casino Constellation—in its private, soundproof cabin.

Fats Magliacca, who remained behind in Manhattan to clean up odds and ends and look after an intricate liquidation of Beaver interests there, arrived in Los Angeles a month after Max and Marie. He played a lesser role, that of a silent shadow for Max Beaver and less of a buffer between Beaver and his lieutenants. He was left out of conferences. He was left at airports when Max Beaver flew to secret appointments at other West Coast cities.

Marie soon tired of the early morning schedules at the studio. "It's not for me, darling," she purred. "But you are." She played a hostess role for Beaver at his three residences—on the rare occasions when he entertained—and complained that he neglected her. "I can't make love with a credit card, darling," she protested when he spent the first weekend in a month with her at the beach house. She spent more and more time with a movie-fringe crowd and protested less and less when Max Beaver was absent "on business".

Beaver saw Moduretti once during his first year on the coast. It was a command performance, ordered in a telegram from Moduretti junior's Chicago travel agency, "Have confirmed reservation for you at Acapulco. Stop. December eighteen." The "Apex" signature was enough for Beaver. He arrived by plane at Acapulco on the eighteenth and was met there by a Moduretti nephew who drove him to a beach cottage. The greeting was warm and friendly.

"You do well, Max. I am pleased," Anthony Moduretti smiled when they were alone on the beach."

"How are things in New York?" Beaver asked.

"Not as they are with you. Joseph and Oddo have not learned the need to keep a shroud of secrecy around their violence. Their technique of handling rivals is the same—an example, a body on the streets—like your own early days

in Red Hook. But that is their problem, Maxey," Moduretti shrugged. "How are your connections in Nevada?"

"No problems. I stay away and let my attorneys handle things over there. Why?"

"Word is around in Chicago that two casinos on the strip can be bought. Think you can handle it for me?"

"I'll talk to my attorneys, Tony. Like you do, I stay out of the public eye. Maybe they can set up a dummy corporation and handle the purchase for you. The people at the Nevada capital are fussy who buys what now in the state."

Moduretti laughed. "You'll last, Maxey. You're more careful than I am. Find out if it can be handled. It's a good investment. Buy in yourself if you feel like it. But keep my name as far in the dark as you keep your own."

Moduretti and Beaver spent the day discussing mutual interests and making verbal agreements on what could and could not be done during the coming year. Beaver left that night, pleased and flattered with Anthony Moduretti's parting remark. "I grow old, Max. I could use you in Chicago—if it were not necessary to have you on the Coast."

"I'll look into the possibility of those strip investments in Vegas, Tony," Beaver promised. "If they can be bought up, I'll have my attorneys get in touch with your's."

Marie's welcome at the beach house—a sexual one prompted by the delicate process of untying two silken knots of a bikini when Beaver came across the split level room —reminded him that he had almost forgotten how to enjoy the brunette's charms. He carried her to an oversized, silk-sheeted bed and forgot, for a few passionate hours, the press of the rackets.

"You're worth waiting for, darling," the naked sexpot sighed "but you're always gone too long between loving."

"You'll get all the love you can handle for a while, baby," Beaver laughed. "We're going to Vegas for the holidays. It'll be like old times—every night in the week!"

He telephoned Fats Magliacca. "Have the Constellation at the L.A. international airport for a midnight flight. Tell the pilot to file a flight plan up to San Francisco. We'll pick up a passenger there; fly to Vegas; and you, Marie and I'll be staying there 'til after New Years. And Fats," Beaver paused while he scribbled a series of figures on a telephone pad, "come down here to Laguna today. I want you to pick up some cash for me up in the city." He called the Vegas casino in which he was the majority stockholder and made reservations for the holiday week. "And," he told his manager, "call Riddell and Kamin for me. You might set up a Christmas Eve party for us. I can talk business with Riddell and Ka-

min while their wives and Marie make like models in the holiday crowd." His invitation to the two Nevada attorneys was accepted as an order and the casino manager arranged for a private party in the owner's suite.

Fats Magliacca made five stops in Los Angeles at five different banks in his cash pickup for Beaver. "It's a lot of dough, Max, to be moving around the country, by plane or any other way," he complained while he repacked bundles of large denomination bills from a large leather satchel to three smaller metal strongboxes.

"You worried about hijackers, Fats?" Beaver laughed.

"I'm not worrying about anything, Max. Planes can crash."

"So if we crash, Fats, we don't worry about money anyway—not even a cool two million."

"I remember the day, Max, when you wanted to frame the first C Note you grabbed."

"And I remember the day back in Red Hook, Fats, when my ambition was to get a fifty dollar bill of my own. Now I worry how I'm going to show a legal income for the bundles I collect."

"Don't you think this is a large-sized bundle to have the casino show as even a holiday take?"

"It's not for the casino, Fats. I may have a deal over in Vegas for which I'll need a lot of cash. Did you line up that Constellation flight for tonight?"

"Like you said, Max."

"You and Marie stay out of the way when I pick my passenger in Frisco, Fats. It's a deal for *our friends* and I don't want the passenger to see either you or Marie. Make sure you and she don't see him. Play it like I say."

"You know me, boss."

The Constellation had been custom-built by its original casino owners for transporting guests who preferred privacy to notoriety on gambling trips. Its interior was divided into one swank "owner's cabin", two smaller private cabins that could be made up into sleeping quarters, and, in the balance of the four-engine plane's interior, a cabin not unlike that of a commercial airliner. On the Frisco flight, Fats Magliacca occupied one of the smaller cabins where he guarded the strong boxes. Before landing in Frisco, Marie moved to the other smaller cabin when Beaver explained, "It's a business talk, baby, private business." Marie asked no questions.

The passenger boarded the ship at a private hangar, carrying an attache case. If his boarding was observed, it seemed neither furtive nor unusual. If he had been stopped, a search would reveal nothing more than an attache case filled with currency, not unusual for a gambler on his way to Vegas. He knew his way to the private cabin. Max Beaver watched as he approached the plane. If he had been other than

the expected passenger he would never have gained access to the plane. Once he was on board, Beaver picked up the plane's 'phone and called the pilot. "OK to take off, Andy." While the casino Constallation waited at the flight line for clearance from the control tower, he talked casually with the passenger. On its short flight from Frisco to Vegas, Beaver counted the money and then delivered instructions for which the passenger had paid fifty thousand dollars: "Stay aboard when we land in Vegas. When you get back to Frisco, check into the El Rancho motel under the name of M. C. Anders. It'll be delivered to you by a uniformed messenger."

In this technique, Beaver wholesaled the narcotics brought in from Hong Kong. He never saw it. No delivery plan was known by any of the regular buyers. And Beaver never saw his henchmen who handled the heroin or morphine. He handed on orders for delivery to them by coded telephone calls. And they learned delivery techniques and pseudo names of buyers only after Beaver had collected. From an airport public 'phone at McKarron Field in Vegas, he called a San Francisco florist shop. "Two dozen red roses for M. C. Anders at the El Rancho," was his message for the "florist".

Beaver and the passenger continued to talk after the plane had landed at Vegas and Fats Magliacca assumed the passenger had left. He walked from his cabin with the strong boxes at the moment Beaver opened the door of his cabin. Fats saw the passenger. And Beaver noticed that Fats saw him. And he noticed the mutual look of recognition as Fats and the passenger passed in the narrow aisle.

Fats paused and looked at Beaver. "You know that character's the hottest junk connection on the Coast, Max?"

"I know nothing, Fats. And you know nothing!" Beaver shot back at him.

But, as Fats left the plane, he again passed the mystery passenger sitting in the public cabin. Beaver opened the door of Marie's cabin and scowled, "Come on, baby. Let's get out of here." He turned to Fats when the door of the casino limousine was closed by its driver. "Get a receipt for that from the head cashier and then come and see me." He spoke neither to Marie nor to Fats as the car sped to the casino strip from the air field.

"You're not in a holiday mood, Max," the brunette pouted when she carelessly tossed a mink stole on a chesterfield of the suite's living room. She moved to him with a suggestive gesture of enticing him into her kind of a holiday mood.

"I just ran into a problem, baby—a fat problem—and for once I can't find a fast answer. Wait for me in the lounge. I want to see Fats." The sexpot turned off her charm and

obeyed as she swept up the stole and left the suite.

Beaver hurled the attache case across the room and slouched in a deep chair. He chain smoked while he waited for Fats Magliacca. He reviewed what had happened. Not only had Fats and the passenger seen each other but also, and worse, they had recognized each other. The meeting had been his fault. He realized he should not have brought along either Fats or Marie. He fumed at himself and his own error. He knew Fats would not talk. He knew the passenger would not talk. He also knew Fats had the ability to put together the mid-air meeting and a knowledge of many flights in the past year on which Beaver travelled alone. "But not Fats," he thought, "not Fats. I can't dump him for gaining an inkling of the junk racket." He concluded his mental summing-up of the problem he had created by his own carelessness in a desire to wrap up a fast deal for Moduretti in the casino investment and party with the sexpot at the same time. "Damn the nympho and damn Moduretti," he screamed inwardly. "Fats has to do the exception!"

"Here's your receipt, Max," Magliacca tossed a stamped cashier's form on a coffee table. You in a talking mood, Max?"

"I'll tell you right now, Fats, the less talking you do, the better off you'll be!"

"The hell with you, Max. I've been around you long enough—since we were kids—to shoot my mouth off when I want to; so long as what I've got to say is for your own good!"

"Now you listen to me, Fats. . . ." Beaver's own anger was contagious and Magliacca raised his own voice as he interrupted.

"Hell, no, Max, you listen to me. You're mixed up in the junk racket and it'll be a one way ticket to you —to a federal pen. And if that's not enough you know what the word is for stuff—don't touch it. Are you money-mad, Max?" Fats didn't wait for an answer. He screamed. "Now I can figure your mystery trips. Now I know why you take off on your own. Your big take is from stuff. You're out on a limb, Max—a heroin limb—and I'm getting out. I've stuck with you for a long time, Max. I never wanted anything. But I've been along with you too long. I thought you were too damn smart to get mixed up in that traffic. And if you're in it, you're in it in a big way. You gawdamn fool!" Before Beaver could scream back at Magliacca, Fats slammed the door of the suite in his face.

Max Beaver slumped down in the deep leather armchair and bit the end off a long Havana. He knew what to do and he couldn't bring himself to do it. He looked at the 'phone and looked away from it. "Putting Fats under a blanket of Nevada sand," he thought, "might

be necessary. But never on the spur of the moment." He decided to give Fats a chance to cool off. He walked to the lounge.

"You look tired, darling." Marie looked questioningly at Beaver when he sat down beside her.

"I'm tired of fools." He ignored her glance of alarm and reassured her that she was not in the category of fools by resting a hand on one of the brunette's nyloned knees. Her response was a delicate, finger-tipped caress running up and down a Beaver thigh. He turned to a hovering waiter, "A double Scotch, Jules."

During the year on the West Coast, Marie had grown accustomed to his moods of taciturn silence. She had learned to wait patiently at his side when he wanted her there or to remain alone when he disappeared on his mysterious flights. When Beaver growled that he "had business to look after," she quipped, "I'll be waiting, darling—in the suite."

He walked into the manager's office, ignoring polite nods from housemen who carefully guarded an ornate reception room. "Did you get hold of Riddell and Kamin?" he asked the casino executive.

"Yes, Max. They'll be in town Christmas Eve."

"Some other things have come up. Would you call them and try to set up a meeting for me with them this afternoon. Let me know as soon as you can contact them."

"Of course, Max," the suave manager replied without question. "Care for a nightcap?"

"I'll join you, Harry." Beaver took advantage of the polite gesture to question Harry Spellman, the veteran Vegas hotel-casino executive. "Any word of offers to sell properties on the strip?"

"Not of offers to sell, Max. But rumor has it that some owners are in trouble at the capital. The attorney general has been snooping into hidden ownership and, I think, some interests could be bought up by the right parties. The problem isn't buying or selling. It's a matter of getting approval from the capital. Word from the governor's office is that investors in casinos will have to show more than cash; they'll also have to show character references. Want me to make some discrete inquiries, Max?"

"No, Harry," Beaver paused to accept the Scotch, "I'll have Riddell and Kamin look into the picture. "How're things here?"

"Good. I'm looking for a better-than-average holiday trade. Casino's had a good week. You want us to handle that deposit you made at the cashier's office last night?"

"No, Harry. I wanted some cash available in the event Riddell and Kamin have a place for it. But I have some cash with me. You might send one of your men along with me now. Show it as the usual casino income and make the usual adjustments for me when dividends

are paid to the holding corporation."

The manager rang for an assistant cashier who accompanied Beaver to his suite. Beaver smoked while a tally was made of the attache case's currency. "I make it fifty thousand, Mr. Beaver."

"Just give me the usual receipt, Jarvis, and thanks."

The casino employe scribled and initialled a receipt. He left with the attache case as if he were carrying home a weekend's groceries. As far as he knew it could be no more than the winnings of a private, high-stake game. Beaver yawned and set the chain on the suite's living room door. He picked up an addressed envelope from a telephone table and tore it open.

"I'm on my way back to Red Hook—Fats" was scrawled on a casino letterhead.

Beaver crumpled the sheet of stationery and cursed. "One problem at a time," he said aloud to the empty living room, "and Moduretti's deal comes first. After that I'll handle Fats." He continued to curse as he walked to the master bathroom where he tore Magliacca's note in small pieces before flushing it away. He looked at the glass shelf and cursed again. He picked up what he never wanted to see—a works—a glass syringe and hypo needle. He smashed both into the commode and savagely flushed it, watching to make sure the addict's evidence disappeared.

"Wake up!" he screamed at the naked brunette.

She responded to his slashing backhand slap drowsily, "I waited for you, darling."

"Like hell you waited, you hophead!" He jerked at her bare arm and saw the needle scars. "How gawdamn long have you been hooked?"

Her reply was dazed. Her eyes were glassy. "How long have you been away, Max?" She fell back to the bed.

Beaver looked down at her. "A beautiful body and a brain like a bird. A junkie!" He slammed the door and walked out. He sat alone at the bar 'til dawn, paying no attention to curious employes whose looks asked what prompted Beaver to spend the night at the bar. He drank and remained sober, dwelling not on why Fats had abandoned him or on why Marie had got the monkey on her back. He knew the answers to those questions. For years in Manhattan, Fats had heard him say "No" to offers in the narcotics traffic. And for months he had realized the nympho brunette wouldn't play house by herself while he neglected her. He had anticipated her acquiring a boyfriend and had been ready to handle that sort of problem. He had never dreamed she was stupid enough to get hooked on heroin. "I don't know what the hell I'm going to do about either of them," he concluded. "Right now my problem is

Moduretti's deal here in Vegas and keeping Fat's desertion and her habit away from any pipelines to Moduretti." He walked, without a sign of a night's drinking, to the hotel barber shop.

"Telephone," the barber apologized. Beaver took the call from his chair.

"Riddell and Kamin can see you any time, Max," the casino manager advised. "They just checked in."

Beaver sighed and thought for a minute. "I'll be in the steam baths, Harry. Tell them to meet me there. Maybe some of their legal problems can be soaked out down there. In half an hour."

He met with the Nevada attorneys in the seclusion of a private Turkish bath operated by the hotel. "Until we're finished, you're out of business, Mike," he ordered the attendant. Packed in towels, the three men settled down to solve a Moduretti problem.

"We could set up another holding corporation, similar to your own here, Max," one attorney advised. "Want to tell us whose interests you're representing?"

"I don't know myself," Beaver lied. "The principal will be represented by Chicago attorneys. If you can get around the people at the capital, go ahead and set up your dummy company. Buy both places if they can be bought. I'll give you an order on some cash I have available here for my end. I've got to get back to L.A. today and look after some other problems. Any idea how long it will take you to find out what you can do for me?"

"A few days. Maybe a week," Kamin suggested.

"Any plans for New Year's?"

"Not particularly," both attorneys smiled.

"I'll be back here New Year's Eve. Let's see if we can't start the new year off with this deal sewed up. Go ahead and make a bid for both those spots down the strip. I'll see you upstairs and give you an order for that cash in the event you need it. Swing this deal, boys, and there'll be a worthwhile commission for both of you."

"See you upstairs, Max," they agreed as they left.

Beaver remained in the bath, still undecided what he would do with Fats and Marie. "Something," he concluded as he dressed, "has to be done and done fast." He went to the manager's office by a private stairway, entering it by a hidden panel door. The look of panic on the manager's face as Beaver walked through the door brought forth another curse. "What now?" Beaver asked.

"Marie!"

"What about Marie?"

"A maid found her on the floor of your bath in the suite. The house doctor couldn't find a pulse. Our standing orders are that he alone can order an ambulance. It was on its way here before I knew of what had happened—and before I could

find you. The abulance attendants are in there now. What do you want done, Max?" The very nervous hotel executive looked to Max Beaver for an order.

"Police called?"

"No. Our house officers are deputies."

"Riddell and Kamin still here?"

"Yes. They're outside."

"Come on," Beaver walked quickly from the office with the worried manager following, "we'll see what goes on in that suite." He paused in the manager's reception room. "Mind hanging around, Riddell—Kamin. I may need you."

At a nod from the manager, the house officer stepped aside. Beaver went straight to the suite's bathroom. He didn't find what he sought—another works. He rushed to the bedroom and pawed through Marie's half-unpacked clothing. There was no sign of vial, bottle or capsules.

"Can I help you, Max?"

"See her purse anywhere?"

Both men made a rapid search of the suite. No purse was found.

"No sign of it, Max," the now frantic manager exclaimed from the sitting room. Anything of value in it? Perhaps the ambulance attendants took it along for identification at the hospital."

"Call the hospital," Beaver ordered. "Find out what her condition is." He ignored the manager's question about the purse's contents.

He listened as the manager repeated, "Dead on arrival!"

"Listen, Harry. This is important. Can you find where that purse is? There could be something in it of real importance to me."

"I'll try, of course, Max. While I call back, why don't you get to the hospital with Riddell and Kamin. Take the head house officer with you. He'll pave the way with the sheriff's people there. Don't worry about publicity. We can handle that."

Max Beaver jumped at two conclusions—that the brunette had died from an overdose of narcotics and that she still had a supply with her when she died. Both conclusions were correct. He had no time to consider any danger that might be present in a trip to the hospital. He had to get that purse. It contained credit cards and other papers that would tie him to the dead girl and the contents of her purse. "You call. Get to someone in authority and tell them to hold that purse." He fumed at a brief delay waiting for the head house officer and raged when the casino limousine driver stopped for a traffic light. "This is an emergency," he screamed at the driver. "Don't make any more stops for anything or anyone 'til you get to that hospital. And pull in at the emergency entrance."

The two attorneys and the casino officer paved the way into the hospital administrator's office. Beaver

was forced into a semblance of self-composure. "Mr. Beaver is a relative of the young lady," Riddell discretely explained. "Are her personal effects available?"

The administrator called, without any effort to induce a prompt answer, and asked for "Miss Beaver's" personal property. He placed the desk 'phone back on its cradle and smiled up at the attorney. "It's a police case, John. Just a routine thing for all D.O.A.'s"

The house officer sensed a need to placate Max Beaver. "Let me look after it, Mr. Beaver. I know the boys from headquarters."

"You do that, Art," Beaver agreed, with outward calmness and inner turmoil. The expression, "police case" was enough for Beaver. He paid no attention to the assurance that it was "just a routine thing." It had been a night of trouble and Beaver held to an old underworld axiom, "Never wait around for questioning."

As the house officer-deputy left the office, Beaver, called to him, "I'll be at the casino."

"Let's go," he turned to Riddell and Kamin. "Not to the casino," he ordered the driver when they were back in the limousine. "Either of you boys have a car in town?"

"My Buick's at the casino," Kamin replied. "It's yours, Max." Neither he nor Riddle questioned a client who put out a thousand a week retainer and who didn't want questions asked.

"Tell the driver where to drop us. I'll see that it is returned to you, Kamin. Then go back to the hospital. If you can get that purse, lock it in a safety deposit box until you hear from me. If you are unable to get it, play it by ear and look after my interests. That's all I can tell you now. I'll call you. And I'm still in town—just unavailable—if anyone wants to know."

Max Beaver kept the Buick at an even hundred fleeing across the desert highway from Vegas to the California line. He drove more cautiously after crossing the state line. At Barstow he parked Kamin's car and rented a U-Drive. At San Bernardino, he checked the U-Drive into a branch of the Barstow agency. He walked two blocks and rented another U-Drive from a rival agency. He left the Freeway at Pasadena and turned in his second rented car. He didn't know if there was anything from which to run but he ran with skill and experience. From three different cabs he entered three different Los Angeles banks from which he drew large sums. From a public 'phone he called Morris Kamin in Las Vegas.

"You used good judgment, Max," the attorney observed when he recognized the caller's voice. "There might have been some embarrassing questions if you had remained at the hospital. I think you know what I mean without mentioning it here. As you instructed,

we'll do our best to look after your interests."

"Your car's at the Ford garage in Barstow, Morris. Someone from the casino can pick it up for you. Many thanks. Do what you can. I'll keep in touch." Beaver hung up before the attorney could ask any questions.

"I'll be out of town for a few days. Keep things quiet," was the identical order Beaver telephoned to his Los Angeles lieutenants. He slapped the receiver back on the coin box before anyone could ask a question. He was aboard a commercial flight to New York before Las Vegas police realized he had left the gambling capital. He slept, sweated, fretted and cursed silently all the way to New York. He wasn't even sure why he chose New York as a haven. He didn't know for sure if a flight was necessary. In the event it was, Max Beaver didn't want to be around the Los Angeles area.

When he picked up a copy of the MIRROR at La Guardia Airport he realized his flight had been a wise movement. "Beaver's doll takes overdose," hit him with a headline punch from the tabloid. He read no farther than the lead paragraph, "Marie Brad, companion of Max Beaver, one-time king of the Uptown rackets, died from an overdose of narcotics. Beaver, sought for questioning on the West Coast, is believed to be in the Los Angeles area. . . ."

"Brooklyn," he told the cabbie. "I'll tell you where to stop."

The Red Hook neighborhood didn't seem the same to Max Beaver. He didn't feel a part of it. And his two-hundred-dollar silk suit marked him. He looked for a familiar face and couldn't find it. At a once-familiar side-street bar a bartender poured a double Scotch for him and wise-cracked, "Slumming, Mac?" Beaver read the MIRROR account of the brunette's death in Las Vegas and dropped the paper on the bar floor. His own two-column picture stared up at him. He twisted it under the sole of his sixty-dollar shoe. He didn't know where to hide in his own home town. He couldn't go Uptown where he would be spotted by the first precinct detective who passed him. He couldn't go Downtown where hoods from the Joseph-Oldo combination would gun him down as soon as Moduretti got word to his former rivals. In the bar's 'phone booth he dialed a number he had once used daily, that of Fats Magliacca's sister. "Fats around?" he asked.

"Just a minute," a female voice answered. The shrill voice, directed away from the 'phone could be heard by Beaver. "Fats, some guy wants you on the 'phone."

Beaver recognized the familiar monotone of his former man Friday, "Yeah?"

"It's me, Fats. I'm in town. I need you. I. . . ."

Magliacca had read the papers too. "Like I said, Max, you got a one-way ticket, and I'm not riding it with you. I told you I was out. I meant it. . . ."

"Wait a minute, Fats. Don't hang up! I've got a bankroll with me. . . ."

"Magliacca laughed and broke into Beaver's appeal. "Dough won't help you now, Max. If the Feds don't get you, Moduretti will." He hung up.

Beaver was on his fifth double Scotch when the Red Hook bartender looked over his shoulder. He screamed as he dropped to the floor behind the bar, "Whyinhell does it have to be in here?"

Moduretti read a late edition of the SUN. "Brooklyn hood gunned down in bar—Max Beaver, 47, one-time syndicate leader of an Uptown Manhattan vice mob, was the target of gangland assassins today in a Red Hook bar." Moduretti looked at the four-column photo of Beaver's bullet-ridden body on the bar floor and sighed, "I've told them again and again that slugs from a machine gun always turn loose a barrage of editorial guns. Those Red Hook fools never learn." He leaned over the arm of his chair and whispered to his fellow, white-haired Sicilian, "Set up a meet on the island with Joseph and Oddo. I'm going to break that pair up. Maybe that way they'll learn to keep their killings in the dark." He rose stiffly from his chair and walked to a window looking over Lake Michigan and the Loop far below. "Oddo will make a good man for the West Coast," he thought, "I have faith in him—like I once had in Beaver!"

He was finally dead. It couldn't have been a surprise to anyone; he'd been dying for four years. The first attack had carried off the life in his left arm; the second, in his left leg; the third, in his entire right side; the fourth had taken his speech; the fifth had claimed what little was left: at last he was completely dead.

In the square before the ancient parish church a hearse patiently awaited the ashen shell of Europe's grand old man of movies, the "star-maker." Photographers snapped pictures of the empty hearse and the restless crowd of reporters, bit-players, hangers-on, and curious tourists milling around it. The hangers-on, in rented formal attire, stared with distaste at the shorts and halters of the tourists. A souvenir vendor set his tray in front of the Ville d'Eglise post office.

"Mon Dieu, what a day!" he muttered, wiping his dripping face and frowning darkly toward the glaring July sun.

The hum of expensive motors gradually seeped into the stifling atmosphere, and a sudden hush settled over the square. A short stream of somber automobiles appeared as if by some dark magic and, led by a huge, beetle-black Rolls, glided down the dirt street, raising a dun miasma which hung in the air, choking the on-lookers and darkening the sun. As it slid smoothly to a stop before the little church, a liveried attendant jumped from the Rolls and walked smartly to its rear door. He grasped the handle and swung the door wide.

Every rheumy, dust-teared male eye filled with sudden desire, each watery female eye with envy, as she emerged slowly from the murky,

BY
E. A.
BOGART

"THE HELPMATE"

It's true . . . she'd made her own bed. But always the wrong people slept in it.

luxurious depths. A heavy black veil hid the famous thick, pouting lips; the huge, limpid eyes; the velvet hair of Gina Galaire de Leve. Weeping softly, she passed into the holy place followed by the dead man's friend and physician, Dr. Maurice Clicot, a 64-year-old, stooped and shrunken, sour-faced gnome.

The young widow and the old friend sat in splendid isolation at the front of the church, the celebrities from the motorcade behind them. A few lucky members of the waiting crowd pushed into the remaining seats at the rear, but the main body of on-lookers stood wedged together in the vestibule, the doorway, and in the space immediately outside, hoping to get a glimpse or hear a word of the melancholy proceedings. The temperature was close to unbearable, and occasionally one of the spectators in the doorway fainted. Some few listened to the little priest and his mass, but most eyes were riveted on the bereaved pair in front of them.

Under her heavy veil, Gina Galaire de Leve closed her eyes and shut out the sound of the solemn service. She could feel the sweat rolling down her face, over her neck, between her breasts.

Goodbye, Charles, you old fraud, she said silently to the man in the casket. *What do you think of your 'sex kitten' now, my old buck! Do you still think I'm so dumb? Well, not too dumb to outsmart you, you old capon. I'll confess to you that there were times when I didn't think I could do it.*

When you had the fourth attack, it was easy simply not giving you the medicine. What a pity it didn't work. Thank God you couldn't talk after that one! What a tale you could have told, eh? Well, you yourself told me often enough that to succeed one must act and act positively, with courage. Ah, but it was a hard thing, a nauseating thing, pouring the whole bottle of your 'heart pills' and a glass of water down your stinking, croaking throat. But I did it—because it was the only way to free myself of you —of Maurice—once and for all. So you made me a star! I paid for it; God, how I paid—with you and with good, old Maurice here. But no more, no more, my old friend.

With the eyes of her mind, she seemed to see the three of them once more, the library basking in warm firelight and soft lamps—a romantic setting and all for the old men and their nightly chess contest.

"Hey, Gina, bring some more beer," the old husband rasped again in her memory. "Your move, my friend."

The physician rubbed his stubbly chin and contemplated the board. Why, wondered Gina, did he have to study each move for half an hour; he always won; Charles always let him win because Maurice was such a poor loser. She closed

the tiny bar refrigerator and, grasping a bottle in each hand, carried them to the game table where she plopped them down irritably. As she turned away, Maurice reached out and pinched her roughly, and the two old men threw back their heads and cackled hysterically.

"She still isn't quick enough for you," Charles de Leve gasped, wiping his streaming eyes with the back of a gnarled hand, at that point, his only usable one.

Gina seethed silently. Retreating to the bar, she poured herself a half glass of Scotch. This must be what hell would be like—the two impotents chortling lasciviously over her, and she, in their fur-lined trap, eternally strangling.

Maurice eyed his friend envyingly. "My God, what a rump that one has, you lucky old capon. It reminds me of when we were young and in the Army—that bar maid at Mer d'Azur. She was the one, eh? How she liked soldiers. She wasn't like this one, keeping her goodies to herself, not that one. She was a generous one. Remember?"

A dreamy look crept into the old husband's eyes. "I remember; I remember. I remember one night when I had that lass ten times—*ten times!*" He smiled at the exaggerated recollection. "Ah, but no more, with my heart and . . . . all."

The doctor patted his friend's trembling hand. "Well, mon ami, I, too, am not the man I once was. Time is cruel. It robs us of the abilities, but leaves us with the desires, eh?" He belched grandly, emitting a stench of beer and garlic which filled the shuttered room. *I shall never eat garlic again,* thought Gina hazily, the whiskey tucking a warm blanket of calm over her—*and that is a pity because I liked it so.*

Now she began to play a game of her own—a solitary, silent game. Her eyes mere slits and a half-smile on her perfect lips, she addressed her first soundless taunt to the doctor. *Go zip up your pants, you old lech. And wash your supper off your filthy vest. You look and smell like the last 100 meals you've pigged.*

Having disposed of the doctor to her temporary satisfaction, she now turned on her husband. *And you, you nasty old man, you smell like the last 100 baths you haven't had. Why did I ever get mixed up with you anyway? I must have been mad! Can you imagine, I honestly didn't think you were so bad at first! Of course, I was only 17. When one is only 17, forty years between a man and woman don't seem so much, but when one is thirty . . . ! What a baby I was. And, of course, mama thought it was great, you and me.*

Mama, oh, mama, did you ever love me, even a little? How could you have expected me, me, your own flesh, to pay such a price just for being famous? And then to go and die before you could enjoy it.

It was your punishment; yes, I say it, your punishment! You once said we were cast from the same mold. You were wrong. There are some things that I *haven't the stomach for. I'm not tough, not strong like you were. If I'd only had a father, maybe he would have saved me. But* you *didn't even know who he was! Maybe old Clicot here is my father. Don't laugh, mama; to hear him tell it, he's sired every wood's colt in France. Can you imagine it? The nights must have been very dark then! You know, mama, for forty years those old bulls have shared everything—everything.*

She peered sideways at the physician in the church pew beside her. *Everything, but me—no, no, not me; you'll never get achance here, you old billy.*

Her attention turned again to the man in the casket. *God, the times I let you slobber over me for publicity pictures. Well, it was all you got from me after the first. You made me sick. When you kissed me, I wanted to throw up. And they called us "The happiest couple in the world," you and me—me, Gina Galaire! I could have had any man in the world, so what was I stuck with? A dirty, revolting seventy-year-old hound. "The happiest couple in the world;" My God, how naive the world is. For that matter, how naive I was to think each time you had an attack, that I was going to be free. God, how you teased me—four times! To lead me to believe, to hope you were dying; then to go and recover—how unfair and how very like you.*

The tinkling bell brought her back into the present, and her attention fixed momentarily on the little priest and his incantations.

What a farce! she thought. *Why should all these people be here? Either they didn't know Charles, or they didn't like him. Nobody liked him but Clicot. And why should I be here? Why shouldn't I be back in Paris with Peter, at last, where I belong? Never mind; I've waited this long, I suppose I can wait till you're safely six feet down, my old buck. And maybe there's something in that, my giving you to the worms. At least if I see it with my own eyes, I'll know I'm finally rid of you. Why do I keep waiting, expecting you to rise up and crawl out of that plush-lined safety deposit box and plague me for another twelve years—till it's too late for me—till no one will look at me—want me. Ah, but as soon as those blessed little maggots and I have struck our bargain, it's farewell forever, my old one, then Peter, my Peter, and Italy, and a warm, carefree life in the sun.*

She wondered happily what it would be like to be married to a young man—to wear a wedding ring proudly—to want to be alone with a husband—to want a man's hot breath and abandoned passion regularly—maybe even every single night! Once she had wanted more

than that—a great deal more—and she had got it, worse luck to her. Now she wanted so little—so very little—just to be free and in love. Was that asking too much?

The priest was saying that Charles de Leve was good—and kind—a good, kind, faithful, loving husband; and he was using her presence here as proof of it. What a fraud *he* was. He'd never even met Charles. How could he know what kind of man Charles had been—what kind of marriage they'd had? Oh, of course. It was in all the magazines, the newspapers, and if this priest could read at all, he'd undoubtedly been treated to the Perfect Marriage Myth.

The perpetration of this fantasy had been Charles' idea. Sometimes she had thought he even believed it himself—the reputation it had given him of perennial youth and an ageless virility; it had come to be his very life's blood! He had fancied that his gaunt figure seemed ten feet tall to other men. Well, maybe it had. After all, hadn't he wooed, won, and satisfied the luscious, maddening, desirable Gina Galaire! People simply ate up that kind of May-December, true-love slop. And she had allowed the myth to grow, for to be perfectly fair, for her part, being the wife of Charles de Leve had made her the foremost star in Europe and had kept the others—the panting, pawing, mauling crowd—away from her. How she hated that eternal admiring mob of men—so rough and sweaty and smelly. But Peter, Peter was different—so sweet, so gentle, so handsome. Peter took a bath every day! He didn't paw her. She smiled at the thought. She pawed him!

How shocked he had been the first time she had kissed him! It had been on the beach at Blaise three years before.

Charles had always liked Blaise; it was so private. So he had decided it was the perfect place to recuperate from his second heart attack. While he took his daily nap with Maurice to watch over him, she had been free to wander around by herself, a rare luxury in those days.

Peter was staying in the villa next to theirs, and he had followed her on the beach several times, trying to strike up a conversation with her to get the interview he'd contracted to do for an American film magazine. And she had always treated him coldly and left him standing, disappointed, on the beach while she retreated to the cliffs above. But this day, this day she hadn't run away from him. To his obvious surprise, she had even invited him to lie on the sand beside her, though she had known what utter madness it was.

She remembered how brown and smooth his skin was that day—how different from the wrinkled, puckered, scaly skin of her husband. A longing had come over her to touch that smooth skin—a longing so strong that it hurt her. As

she ran her finger down his chest, an electric shock burned into the pit of her stomach, and she pressed her lips to his skin with all the passion she had stored in her aching body.

Peter scrambled to his feet and bellowed, "Are you out of your mind?" But she could see how affected he'd been, and she laughed until tears streamed down her face and she sobbed, bitterly, heart-sick and lonely.

"Yes, yes, I am going out of my mind," her voice quavered like a heartbroken child's. "Oh, please sit down. Please! I need you. I need you so! You can't understand . . ."

Maurice had reached over and taken her hand. He squeezed it and smiled at her knowingly. She shuddered, nauseated; drew her hand away; and pretended to concentrate on the casket. She was trying desperately to recapture the exciting scene on the beach, the first thrill, the breathless joy, the wonderful pain. It was no good; he'd spoiled it all.

Maurice looked down at his empty hand, frowning, and turned toward her again. Fumbling through his pockets, he drew forth the tiny, empty medicine bottle and fingered it thoughtfully. His eyes traveled from the object in his hand to the face of the woman beside him. And, though she avoided his gaze, Gina could feel their calculating leer. Her skin crawled under its black camouflage. But how could this be? Everything had gone perfectly. Charles had died almost immediately, whether from the attack he was having or the overdose of medicine, it didn't seem to matter—then. Clicot had signed the death certificate without a murmur.

But she knew that the bottle, empty or full, was of no importance. The thing that mattered was that Maurice had guessed what she had done. He might not be a man anymore, but he was still a doctor. And being a doctor, a competent, respectable doctor, all he'd have to do would be raise a doubt which would force an autopsy; and if there were an autopsy, they would find Charles chock full of the poisonous little pills, or at least what they'd been made of; and everyone would know, even if they couldn't prove it, they would know. It would be the end of her—her career—and Peter.

She should have tried withholding the medicine again. She shouldn't have been so impatient. Yes, she should have tried withholding it again. It would have been safer.

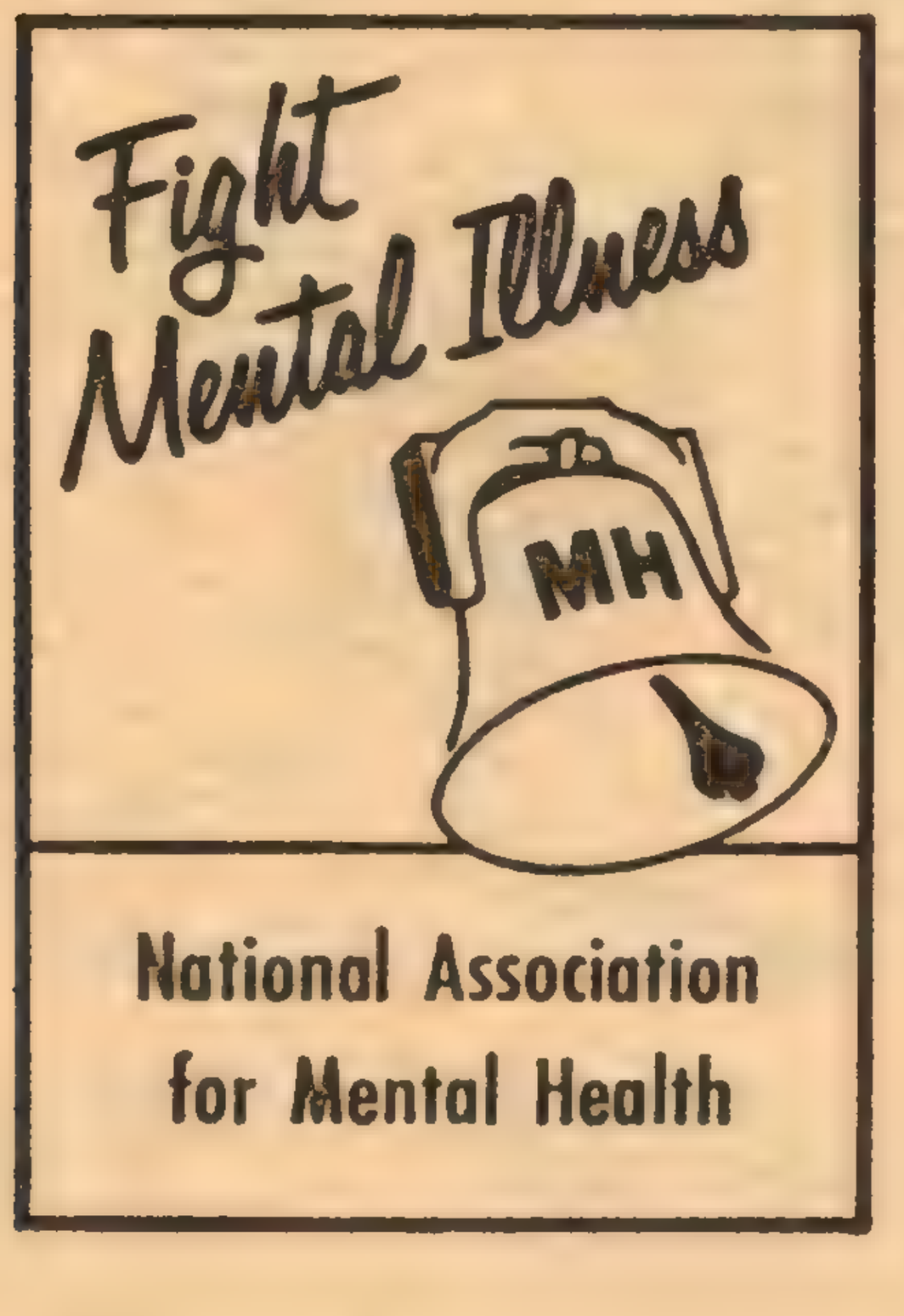
My God, her mind screamed at her, *can't you understand? It doesn't matter what you should have done. It doesn't matter at all anymore.*

Suddenly, the life flowed out of her and her empty body sagged.

Maurice reached into his pocket again, pulled out a pencil and pre-

scription pad, and wrote laboriously, licking the tip of the pencil several times. He handed the note to her. She knew what it would say before she read it, and she nodded mechanically. She should have known it would be this way—no beautiful, handsome Peter. Only a trade—a sick, old Charles for a healthy, lecherous old Maurice.

She started to sob uncontrollably. Maurice, a sly smile on his lips, helped her to her feet with feigned solicitude and supported her to the door, out into the blazing afternoon, down the steps, and into the suffocating embrace of the redoubtable Rolls.



THE DEATH MAKER

After boarding the train, the attractive and shapely blonde walked through the narrow coach aisle a step or two in front of Slant Edwards. When the train started she was thrust back and her body pressed hard against Slant's. She made no effort to break the contact; instead, she let the full lush curves

BY
NELSON
ADCOCK

It was one of those messy emotional deals. Slant wanted to back out . . . but he had a reputation to consider.

of her form rest against Slant's lean muscles. Slant stepped back.

The blonde turned and smiled, saying in a throaty, low voice, "Sorry, Mr. Edwards."

Slant's pale gray eyes and thin lips moved hardly at all when he replied, "It's nice, but not necessary."

"You don't have to be nasty about it," the blonde shot back, her face coloring under heavy make-up. She moved away.

"I wasn't." With these blunt words, Slant indicated a pair of vacant seats at the end of the coach. "These'll do fine."

The blonde took the far seat on the window side and looked straight ahead. She crossed her leg, smoothed her powder-blue woolen skirt, dropped her coat back off her shoulders, fussed for something in her purse, and at last brought her large china-blue eyes round to Slant's. She looked reproachful, but said nothing.

"You don't have to pad your bet," Slant told her. His face was completely placid and without any specific expression. Thin, actually bony in spots, the hard shadows of the coach lights made it look hollow-eyed and emaciated—almost a death's head, in fact.

"What's that supposed to mean?" the blonde asked. She kicked one foot against the red plush back of the seat ahead, digging the sharp, slender high-heel of her small shoe into the fabric roughly. The shoe was scarlet, of the same bright tone as her purse and gloves.

"Mrs. Wendell," Slant said, still without particular expression, "The money you're paying me is enough. I'll do the job fine without any—any additional incentive."

For the best part of a minute the blonde said nothing. She kept looking at Slant and then frowned. "You're a funny-looking guy for this job," she said at last. "I hope Barney didn't give me a wrong steer."

Slant took a case of cigarettes from his inside jacket pocket, opened it, and held it toward the blonde. He said softly: "If I looked and acted like what I am, I'd have been dead or in jail long ago. Barney referred you to the right party, Mrs. Wendell."

After another long silence, the blonde said, "My name's not Wendell. That's just a phony handle Barney made up. I'm Elsie. Elsie Kane. I'm not married. Never was. And I'm not rich. I'm a waitress in a hash joint. It took me eight years to save and chisel the five-grand I'm paying you."

"Don't you want a cigarette?" Slant asked. "Elsie Kane is perfectly all right with me."

Elsie Kane took a cigarette. "Yeah, that may be. But the point is you're a big investment for me. I'll tell you right on the line that you don't look up to the job. John Clement is tough. Plenty tough. And his goon, Monk Callahan, is an ex-wrestling champ. These are big bad boys, Mister Edwards."

For the first time since he'd been with Elsie Kane, Slant's thin lips released into a genuine smile. "Nobody," he said with a chuckel, "is tougher than a steel-jacket .45 slug. I never met anybody in twenty years who was." The smile faded

away and Slant held out a thin silver lighter while Elsie puffed on her cigarette. "You don't have to go along, you know," he added casually. "In fact, I'd like it better if you didn't."

"You must be kidding." Elsie let out a big breath of smoke and almost choked on the words. "Why, Mister, I been living for this night the last eight years. Every day for eight years I've waited for this night. When I slept I dreamed of it. You bet I'm going. I want to see John Clement get it with my own eyes."

Slant smoked his cigarette and said nothing. Elsie touched the sleeve of his coat with an enameled, polished fingernail. "You understand? You know how I feel?"

Slant nodded. "Yeah. I don't like it too much."

"*You* don't like it too much? That's just great. That makes me feel swell. Maybe I should take the five-grand and buy Clement a present instead of paying you to dust him off. How would you like that?"

In a level tone of voice, Slant answered: "Keep your voice down. Squaring a guy off for business reasons is one thing; revenge is another. Revenge jobs are bad. They go sour. They gum up easy and they're dangerous. If I'd known this exact set-up, I wouldn't have taken it on—even though I need the money."

"Great," Elsie sneered. Her eyes traveled over the thin man's frame with contempt. "So give me back the dough and duck out."

Slant shook his head. "It's not that easy. There's Barney's cut to consider. And there's the cost of the set-up. There's the rented car and some hotel-rooms booked and waiting for us. Certain other expenses are paid. And there's something else more important than all that."

"What?"

"My reputation. To people in the know, your John Clement's as good as dead."

The corners of Elsie's eyes narrowed and her thin, plucked, pale sienna-colored eyebrows drew together. "As good as dead?" she repeated the words.

"Because you hired me," Slant replied simply.

Elsie's face relaxed somewhat and she smiled. "Now that kind of talk I like to hear. That's more like it."

"Still," Slant added, "It'd be better if you'd wait in the hotel."

"Not a chance." Elsie shook her head decisively. "It wouldn't be worth two-cents if I didn't see it happen."

Shrugging, Slant concentrated on his cigarette for a minute, finished it, crushed it carefully in the chair-arm ashtray, and then adjusted his white shirt collar and plain dark blue tie. His sparse, sandy-colored hair was clipped high at the ears and neck and neatly combed straight back. He ran a hand over

it although it was unnecessary, every hair being in perfect order.

"It won't mean a thing if you do see it," he spoke at last.

"No?" Elsie grinned. She dropped her cigarette butt and twisted it into a shapeless mass with her shoe. "You couldn't be wronger, Mister. You never hated anybody like I hate John Clement."

Slant concentrated his eyes on the red plush of the seat ahead. "I never hated anybody, period."

"That's a joke."

"It's the truth."

"Come on," Elsie grinned more broadly. "A guy with your job and your rep?"

Slant shook his head sideways. "Nobody's worth hating. Nobody's worth any kind of emotional attachment."

Disbelief and puzzlement became plain on Elsie's face. "I don't get you there, Mister. Jeez, you talk and act funny. You're a big-time kil-"

"Take it easy," Slant cautioned her, bringing his eyes round quickly. "There are other people on the train."

"Yeah. I'm sorry. Well, Barney says you're the best and five-grand's a lot of dough, so I guess you know your business. You don't hate anybody you just—" Elsie dropped her voice to a whisper—"knock 'em off. Boy, that's something."

"It's just a job." Slant smiled in a crooked, one-sided way. The smile was unpleasant and humorless. It was this curious slanted expression of his thin lips that had earned him his nickname. He said, "Suppose you tell me something about this John Clement. What is he and what's he to you?"

Elsie Kane lifted an eyebrow and looked sideways, archly, saying, "If it's just a job, how come you're interested?"

"It's a long ride. It'll pass the time."

"Okay. Clement's a retired junk-dealer—"

"You mean real junk like scrap-iron, or snow?"

"I mean hop. Dream-gum. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Well, Clement made a bundle over the years and somehow kept his nose clean. He never took a rap. When he retired he bought himself this gentleman's farm up in Bucks County and began breeding horses. He took his number one hood into pasture with him—that's Monk Callahan. And that's it. They live there and mingle with the best."

"So where do you fit in?" Slant asked.

"I came in the picture eight years ago—right after he retired. I was a kid. A darn good-looking kid, although you won't believe it looking at me now."

Slant showed a mild surprise and said, "You're not bad-looking at all."

"Plastic surgery," Elsie laughed bitterly. "John Clement and Monk

Callahan beat my real face to pieces."

"Why?"

"For kicks. John Clement gets his kicks that way. Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Clement picked me up in a restaurant where I'd just started working and promised me the moon with a ring around it. Like a dope I took the bait and went to his place with him. First he hooked me on heroin and then began beating hell out of me just for fun. Believe it or not, it's the truth. Anyway, I took it for six months because I needed the dope and then one night I came across some money John left lying on a bureau—a little more than four-hundred bucks—and it looked like a million to me then. I grabbed it and beat it out of the house. It was in January. Cold—Jeez, it was cold!—but, anyway, I got out on the highway and just missed the last bus for the night. Lousy luck! In two hours I'd have been up in the Big Apple, lost among ten-million ghees. Well, I began hoofing down the highway, praying that somebody'd come along and give me a lift. I guess I got a mile before a car came up behind me. My dogs were frozen and shot by then, so I just stood and waited. Oh Lord, I prayed, let this be some nice kind simple jerk who'll run me into town. I been pretty bad, I told God, but give me a break just this once.

Elsie stopped speaking, turned her face toward the train window, and appeared to concentrate on the dark shadows of trees, poles, and isolated houses that rushed by. Then her eyes went upward. There was a moon hidden behind some big dark clouds and it edged them with silver. The sky was wild.

"Matter of fact," Elsie continued, staring at the sky, "it kind of looked like tonight. Ghosty looking clouds just like them. Only it's not so cold now and there's no snow."

"It'll probably rain," Slant said. "The forecast is for rain. But go on with the story."

With a short, jerky laugh, Elsie kicked the seat ahead viciously and twisted her foot, almost ripping the fabric. "I guess," she said, "I put the word in with the Old Man Above too late. Or didn't say the right word. Anyway, the car stopped all right. It was a big black Cadillac—John Clement's. Him and Monk Callahan were in it. Clement got out, came over, said, 'Hello, Blondie,—going somewhere?' and he smashed me in the nose with his fist. He picked me up, propped me against the car, and beat me until his arms were tired. Then Monk Callahan had a go at it while Clement watched. I don't remember much after that, but some time passed and they played around and when they were done with me they carried me across a fence and tossed me into a ditch full of ice and snow. I was a strong girl and

I didn't croak, but I hadn't a tooth in my head and I couldn't see, and I figured I was dying. And to tell the truth, by then I didn't give a damn. I don't know how long I laid there because I finally passed out good. I came to in a doctor's office—or what I thought was a doctor's office—and a bald-headed old guy in a white gown was working over me. I could see pretty good and I was surprised. I was more surprised when I found out it was three days later and I'd been out or delirious all the time while this old ghee had treated me for shock, fed me by injection, and had rebuilt my face. Pretty soon I got the word that I was in a private hospital owned by the old doctor, who turned out to be a very famous plastic-surgeon. A big New York man, mostly retired, who took only special cases that interested him. I was the triumph of his career. On me he'd done the impossible. He wrote me up in the books, complete with pictures. He had a lot of great specialists visit, look at me and at the pictures, and then he'd explain how he'd done the job. He was bugged, I guess. You wouldn't have thought I was a person at all. I don't think the old loon ever even knew my name and he never asked anything about me or for a dime of money. But my face sure was his pride and joy. I was kind of scared to tell him I was a hophead. He'd been giving me morphine or something anyway as part of the treatment, and for over a week I had enough hop to keep normal. But at last I had to tell him—that is, I wrote it, for I couldn't work my jaws yet. I was surprised again, for he didn't seem to take it very serious. He called one of his assistants and told him to put me on small doses of morphine and something that sounded like strychnine or atropine and a couple other things. Anyway, the young guy weaned me off the hop. He said my habit wasn't too bad and was only chemical with no psychological basis—you're smiling?—listen, Mister, I laid in that room for weeks listening to those birds talk about me like I wasn't there until I began to feel like a sawbones myself. And the young guy who got me off the dope had me writing my life's history for him. He even had me writing down my dreams—all crazy stuff."

Elsie paused and took a deep breath. Slant waited, then asked, "And they didn't send the cops round to Clement's?"

Shaking her head negatively, Elsie replied, "I didn't tell them it was Clement and Monk. I said the guys who beat me were strangers who spotted me alone on the road."

"Why didn't you tell?"

"I was scared." Elsie shrugged. "Plenty scared. Clement was retired from the rackets, but he'd still connections everywhere. He still has, matter of fact. Anybody who'd yell cop for any reason on a guy like

Clement is done. Too many cheap buzzers itching to do him a favor. And besides, Mister, it ain't my nature dealing with fuzz. I'll settle my own score, privately."

Slant took out his cigarette case again and held the thin lighter for Elsie. "But who found you in the ditch?"

"A state trooper," she replied, puffing smoke. "He came along just as Clement and Monk were getting back in the car. They took off fast and the trooper stopped to see what the hell two guys with a Cadillac were doing in a snowfield in the middle of the night. He found me, but he couldn't catch up with Clement. I don't know what happened—maybe his radio was on the blink. Anyway, he took me to the old doc's place. He came back a couple times with his lieutenant, but I told 'em nothing. When I left the hospital I got a job in another city and I been living for this night ever since then. Now you know why I feel the way I do. You blame me, Mister?"

"No, I guess I don't blame anybody for what they do." Slant exhaled cigarette smoke with the words and shook his head. "Everybody does what they have to do. What their gut and their brain makes 'em do. But mostly their gut.'

After a silence, Elsie said, "Jeez, you're a weirdy. I mean it. Sometimes you talk like a creep."

"I guess so." Slant shrugged.

"Plain creep-talk. That's all it is."

Slant said nothing.

"You still think I'm conning myself about Clement, don't you?" Elsie demanded. "I'm paying you five-grand and you think I'm a fool."

"Maybe. But no more than I am."

Elsie grinned. "Well, thanks for that much. Say—you know what we both need? A drink. No fooling. A little drink to get the horseradish out of our hair. You'd think we was going to *our* funeral, the way we been talking."

"There's no club-car on this train," Slant replied with no particular expression. "From the rail road's viewpoint, it's practically a local." He glanced at a plain gold watch strapped to his bony wrist, pulling back an immaculate white shirt-cuff in the process. "We'll be there in ten or twelve minutes."

Elsie winked at Slant and opened her oversized handbag. She took an unopened half-pint of good bourbon whiskey from among the clutter of objects it contained, extended it toward Slant, and said, "A hair of the dog."

Slant declined with a single shake of his head. "No thanks. I wasn't bitten."

Elsie's eyes narrowed. "This wrong too? Holy cow! Well, at least you can open it for me."

Wordlessly, Slant took the bottle in hand and slit the seal with a thumbnail. He loosened the cap a half-turn and handed the bottle back.

"I think you'd make a hell of a

good scoutmaster," Elsie said, taking a quick slug from the neck of the bottle. "Ah," she added, "I guess this beats talking."

Slant nodded.

"I think you think anything beats talking." Elsie chuckled.

"Most of the time."

Taking another slug of whiskey, Elsie capped the bottle and put it away. She stretched back in the seat, breathed deep, and looked up at the ceiling of the coach, saying, "I'm not a lush. This is special deal. After eight years of working and scrimping I got a right to a little dutch courage. Mister, if you knew how I lived and some of the things I done to get together that five-grand, your eyeballs would pop."

"I doubt it." Slant stifled a yawn. "When an idea hits some people they go all the way. I know how it is. They'll run themselves and everybody else to hell and gone."

Elsie sneered. "But not you?"

"No," Slant agreed. "Not me."

After that, they rode along in silence for a few minutes until Elsie broke it by saying, "A guy like you probably never got it in the neck. It's pretty easy to preach." Her tone was sullen and she stared at her hands while she twisted one scarlet glove into a tight strand of leather.

"The reason I know about one-track minds," Slant said quietly, after a moment's thoughtful pause, "is because of my old man. He practically watched my mother starve to death while he saved every penny he earned for twenty-years to buy his own garage. That was his idea —to own his own garage. Everything in the world would be right if he could do that one thing—own his own garage. For years we ate three regular meals a week in the house where I grew up. My brother and I stole pretzels, candy, milk from doorsteps, and anything else we could lay a hand on, to fill our bellies. The crying shame of it all was that the old lady was religious as hell and wouldn't touch a crumb of any stuff we brought home. She figured how we got it. So the old man killed her physically and we broke her heart."

Elsie turned and asked, "Did your old man get his garage?"

"Sure."

"What happened?"

"Happened?" Slant shrugged. "Nothing. He still has it. It does a good business. The old man's almost eighty and has a sock full of money."

Disappointment crossed Elsie's face. Slant saw it and looked at her with his crooked smile. "You expected divine justice? Forget it, it's a joke. The old man's healthy and happy. He writes checks and has masses said for my mother's soul. Up to a few years ago he kept mistresses."

"It's a damn shame," Elsie said, a warm sympathetic tremor in her husky voice. She looked about to cry.

Slant shook his head. "No. It's

the way things work. I only told you so you'd understand I know about ideas and what people do for the sake of them."

"You must hate him." Elsie's words were a flat statement, not a question. Slant smiled again.

"The old man? No, I don't hate him. I told you I never hated anybody."

"There's something wrong with you," Elsie said. She looked disgusted. "You're not natural."

"Maybe not," Slant replied with indifference. He stood up, smoothed his coat, and added in a cool, businesslike tone, "We're coming to our stop. Are you ready?"

"Yeah," Elsie told him, "I been ready for a long, long time."

2

They had dinner at the hotel, during which Elsie drank two cocktails and a highball. When she wanted a second highball Slant said there would be no more drinking until the job was over. Elsie didn't like the order, but she went along. Then Slant told her to wait in their rooms, rest, freshen-up, or do whatever she wanted except drink, while he went to see about the hired car that was supposed to be ready and waiting. It was. After getting it and checking it out performance-wise, Slant parked near the hotel and went to a telephone in a drugstore. He dialed the number of John Clement's stud-farm. A heavy-voiced man answered.

"I'm interested in buying a horse," Slant said.

"No horses are up for sale right now," the deep voice told him.

"You Mr. Callahan?" Slant asked

There was a silence, then: "Who is this?"

"George Stokes," Slant replied lightly. "I spoke to you before. Can I have a word with Mr. Clement, please?"

"Wait a minute. I'll see."

Slant smiled his crooked smile. Because he was alone in the booth he let the expression remain and develop into a grin. John Clement was at home as he'd expected. That meant there would be no need of a prolonged stay at the hotel. Slant had called Clement earlier from New York, introducing himself as George Stokes, a wealthy horse-fancier.

After another thirty-seconds the rough voice of Monk Callahan came back. "Look here, Mr. Stokes, how about calling tomorrow? Clement says he's sorry, but it's too late for business tonight."

"Certainly," Slant said cheerfully. "Goodnight." He hung up, went to the cigar-counter and bought cigarettes, a roll of hard candy, a folder of lighter-flints, and a newspaper. Then he returned to the hotel and went up to the rooms he'd reserved for Elsie and himself. It was just short of an hour since he'd parted from her.

She was waiting for him in the

sitting-room of the small hotel-suite. She'd undressed, showered, rearranged her hair, and was wearing a pink kimono, pink satin mules, and not much else that Slant could see. A glass on a small side-table and the empty half-pint bourbon bottle clearly indicated how Elsie had passed the time. As soon as Slant closed the door, she giggled, got up, put her arms round him, and pressed a hard probing kiss on his lips. The smell of perfume and whiskey came in a dense cloud.

Slant put firm hands on her shoulders and pushed her away, driving her back into a chair. He followed up close, stood over her, and slapped her face twice—hard, stinging blows.

"What's the matter with you?" she cried. "You gone nuts? Why you knocking me around? What's wrong with a little kiss, huh? Or are you queer or something?"

The thin line that was Slant's lips turned downward in disgust. "A lush. A cheap job to start with and now a lush. No thanks." He reached into his breast pocket and brought out a thick sheaf of banknotes. Peeling off five-grand, he tossed it on the end-table beside the empty bourbon bottle. "There's your dough," he said, turning on his heel. "So long."

"You yellow bastard!" Elsie screamed after him. "You're running out 'cause you're scared. You're scared white. You just wanted an excuse. I'm not drunk. So what if I celebrate a little? What's it to you?" In the tussle and excitement Elsie's kimono had become twisted and had parted, exposing her heavy, but nicely shaped breasts. She drew the cloth together, hiding them. "G'wan, beat it," she added scornfully. "You're lammin' because you're afraid of John Clement. And the Monk. Either of them could break you in half, you lousy skinny runt. Killer—ha! You ain't even a man. You're a fag."

Pausing, his hand gripping the doorknob, Slant turned and looked at Elsie. His face was rigid and white as caked lime.

"It's the truth!" Elsie screamed at him. "Big deal killer! Running out because you have to face John Clement. Wait'll I see that slob Barney. Geez, won't I tell him a thing or two! Some red-hot! It's a joke!" Putting her hands to her face, Elsie began laughing in a high, hysterical key. She kept it up for a while, then threw her head back and stared wild-eyed at the ceiling, continuing to laugh, loud and long.

Slant let go of the doorknob, walked over, and looked down at her. His features were tight, thinned down to shadows, and harsh. The sharp bones of his face protruded, making wide hollows of gray purple tint; the slightly crooked smile was on his lips and at one side the edges of his small uneven teeth were visible. His pale gray eyes had become nothing but cold violet holes, like the empty sockets of a

bare skull. The likeness to a bony death-mask was startling. He kept staring at Elsie while she laughed and his left hand rested lightly in his pocket.

In a little while she began laughing less and more quietly. Her eyes began to sober and widen.

Slant's hand moved from his pocket. In it he held a stubby .32 cal. revolver with a silencer clamped to the barrel.

Horror crossed Elsie's face.

"No, no!" she cried. "I didn't mean it!"

With no change in his expression, Slant stood there.

Elsie threw herself forward to the floor. On her knees she hugged Slant's legs, crying, "I didn't mean it! You said you couldn't hate anybody. Remember? I didn't mean what I said!"

"It don't matter what you said," Slant told her in cold monotonous tones. "I don't hate you. You're a lush and you're dangerous. Too dangerous to live."

"No!" Elsie cried. "All right, I'm a lush. But I'm not a rat. Think whatever you want; keep the money and don't do the job, but I swear I'll never tell. Please!"

Slant's face was impassive. He stared at the pleading woman, and the ugly, short gun with its soot-colored muffling tube was only scant inches from her breast.

"Did I yell cop or squeal when John Clement worked me over?" Elsie asked desperately, big tears in her eyes. "I only said what I said 'cause you gave me the brush-off. That ain't easy for a woman to to take."

For another thirty seconds Slant remained as he was, letting Elsie plead for her life. Then he returned the gun to his pocket. He said: "Get dressed. We'll get this thing over."

"You'll do it?" Elsie asked, giving a great sigh of relief.

"Yes." Slant looked at his watch. "We'll leave in ten-minutes. Get dressed." He went to the table, took the money he'd thrown there, lit a cigarette, and sat down. "Get dressed," he repeated.

Completely sober now, Elsie went into the bedroom and put on her clothes. When she returned, Slant was still sitting in the same chair. He crushed out his third cigarette, nodded, got up, and held open the door. Elsie smiled and went out.

3

For the first ten-minutes or so out on the highway neither Slant nor Elsie spoke a word. The car radio was playing at low volume. A friendly, informal-type disc-jockey was airing records from back in the forties and spicing them with remarks and anecdotes about the artists. To hear him, one got the impression he knew all the greats of the music world personally. As the recorded voice of Georgia Gibbs sang "Shoo, Shoo Baby", Else broke the quiet mood by saying, "I re-

member that. I'd just finished grammar school when it came out."

Slant nodded and kept his eyes on the road. He held the car at a precise fifty and used the exact center of the last right hand lane. Both his hands were on the wheel, relaxed but firm, and he was not smoking. As traffic approached he dimmed his headlights well in advance and kept them dim whether the other cars responded or not. He was on the alert for signs and anything unusual.

"Another one I liked was 'Deep Purple'," Elsie said. "Boy I used to go for bands. I cried for days about Glenn Miller." She was slumped back in the car seat, legs stretched forward, smoking a cigarette. She gave a nervous laugh. "Gee, I'm sorry I got a little canned and said what I said. But like I told you, this is a great night for me."

"Forget it," Slant advised. "What's done's done."

"Yeah. That's so."

The record on the radio changed. A trumpet began performing musical gymnastics with a tune called 'The Angels Sing'. Slant and Elise listened for a full chorus, then Elsie said, "When you put the drop on that rat Clement, maybe you could just wing him first. I don't want him to go out not knowing who got him."

"I'll keep it in mind." Slant nodded. "I'll put a slug low in his gut and you can laugh at him for an hour. He'll suffer plenty." The words were edged with bitterness.

Elsie nodded happily. "That'd be swell. What a night!"

"I hope you're not disappointed," Slant said.

"Not if Clement gets his, I won't be."

"Maybe not." Slant flicked his eyes for an instant from the highway to Elsie's face. "You want to hear a story?"

"A story?"

"Yeah. Ziggy Elman and the trumpet made me think of it. It's got to do with revenge."

Elsie sounded surprised when she answered, "Sure, I want to hear it."

Eyes still on the road, Slant said, "Well, a good while back, right after the war, there was a kid up in New York who hung around the Clinton Stacey Hotel. I was living there then and just starting in my business. I'd been out of the army about six months. This kid I'm talking about was maybe twenty years old and his name was Herbert Silver. A Jewish kid. He was a good kid and came from a nice sensible hard-working family somewhere in Brooklyn. But he was corked. He was red hot to be a great trumpet-player. He split with his family and tried to make it in Manhattan, bucking the grift, and living mostly at the fifteen-cent spaghetti stands. A lot of con-guys and red-hots were staying at the Clinton in those days and some of them helped the kid in exchange for an errand or maybe playing shill, so somehow he man-

aged to get along. But his whole life was hooked to playing the tumpet. He practiced every spare minute, day after day, and never let up. And after about two years of it he finally landed a job two nights a week in a fifth-rate bar in the village. A lot of people in the know heard him then —hips ghees and swingers—and they said he was all right as a straight horn man, but he had nothing special on the ball. Yet getting even this cheap spot was enough to fan the fire under Herbie. He practiced more than ever. He sat for hours beside a record-player buzzing along with James, Davis, Armstrong, and a lot of other guys I don't know or can't remember. But believe me, if hard work and practice could make a jazzman, Herbie Silver would have been the greatest of them all. He just about killed himself. But it did no good. He didn't have it. He played the music the way all the guys he admired played it, but he had no way of playing it that was strictly his own. So a couple years went by and he got no further than the cheap job in the fifth-rate bar."

Slant paused and cleared his throat. His eyes, as usual, were fixed steadily on the road. He broke the thread of the story by asking, "You got a picture of this guy? I'm not much for telling stories."

"Yeah. Somebody should've wised the kid up." Elsie shook her head sideways. "A damn shame."

"A lot of guys tried," Slant continued, "but he was deaf on the subject. Well, after a long time he got desperate and he went way uptown where a big shot of the jazz-world lived and managed to get in to see him. The guy was in a good mood and he listened to Herbie bat out a couple numbers. When Herbie finished the great jazzman said, 'Man, you just ain't putting nothing at all into that horn except air. I thought you said you *liked* to make jazz?' Well, this kind of knocked Herbie for a loop, but he and the jazzman talked some more and at last the guy told him, 'I dig you now, son. Your trouble is you got two big hard knots up under your ears. They block off everything. You gotta untie 'em, boy; then whatever's in you can come out. Lotta people's got them knots from too much schoolin' and thinkin' and mostly too much upbringing all around, and they can do a lot of things, but they can't swing. They can't go, Man.' Well, hearing this got Herbie all excited and right away he wanted to know how to go about untieing the knots. The jazzman told him sometimes booze could do it, sometimes the right kind of dame, but most always tea was the best medicine. Meaning marihuana, of course. But the guy went on and warned Herbie that tea wasn't always the final answer and sometimes it got round to where a guy needed horse, and then he was hooked and in trouble, the laws and the fuzz being what they are. And

then the jazzman added that considering all the jobs a guy could do besides blow a horn, maybe Herbie's best bet in the long run was to forget the whole thing or practice up on triple-tonguing and get a slot in a square band where you just play what's written for you."

Slant stopped and flicked his eyes quickly at Elsie. "You interested in this? It'll get to the part about revenge pretty soon."

"Sure," Elsie said. She lit two cigarettes and put one between Slant's lips. He puffed it a couple times and stuffed it into the dashboard ashtray.

"Well," Slant continued, giving a quick chuckle, "Herbie would've gone straight to hell if it would help his trumpet playing, so he cut downtown and found a tea-merchant. He got reefers and began smoking them. And just to make sure, he drank gin and wine, and kept his eye peeled for a swinging dame. The reefers and booze seemed to do it too. It wasn't long before Herbie was born as a trumpet man. A whole new quality came into his work and he began to stir up a storm. Before that year was out he was considered the most original and promising of the little combo players. He worked every night and got himself a job at a good club. And, maybe best of all, he began to build up a bankroll. Of course, all this time he kept smoking tea and drinking booze, but so far he was able to control it pretty good. Then he got an offer to play at the Savannah Terrace—a plush spot—and he took it. He met a girl who was singing there and the pair of them clicked right off. In a couple months they were married. For a while things went along fine. Herbie still hit the reefers and the gin and his music kept getting better and better. He began making records and fat royalties began pouring in. Everything was hotsy-totsy and the sky was the limit. The only rub was that Herbie found himself using more and more tea, and he had a problem to keep his wife from knowing. He thought of himself as a hophead, you see, and he was ashamed. Also, deep down inside he felt he should be able to play his horn without using loco weed, and I guess his conscience bothered him. Gradually Herbie became touchy and bad-tempered, and the whole situation was strained. Well, the problem got settled in a different way. One Saturday night a big-time Jersey red-hot named Lew Montana stopped in the Savannah Club for a few drinks and a good time. Montana was plenty big in those days; him and Dirty Al Shulman ran every operation in Jersey, and he was a fast spender and wild ghee on a drunk. Well, as the night went on, Montana got pretty high and feeling good, and in a playful way he gave Herbie's wife a pat on the behind—she was still singing at the club, you see. Now Montana didn't know she was anybody's wife in particular and he didn't mean any

real harm, but Herbie took it bad. He had enough gage in him not to give a damn whether Lew Montana was what he was or not. Herbie came down off the bandstand and belted Lew right in the choppers with his brass trumpet. He knocked out a half-dozen of Lew's teeth and had him squirting blood like a stuck pig. This was a serious thing. A couple of Lew's boys jumped up and really went to work on Herbie. They pasted him around and gave him the leather until he looked like chopped up dogmeat. He spent six weeks in the hospital and when he came out he found that his trumpet-playing days were over. A surgeon had fixed him up so he looked okay, but the muscle structure and strength in his lips was all gone. A ritzy specialist went over Herbie, shook his head, and told him to forget about the horn. Naturally this hit him pretty hard. So a couple weeks later he came round to the Stacey Hotel and asked for me. I talked to him. He wanted to know if I'd gun Lew Montana. I said I'd gun anybody for a price, but the price on a guy like Montana would necessarily be high, as I'd have to blow the east coast for a year or two and cool off. Herbie asked how much. Now I liked Herbie and I gave him a good deal; I said twenty-grand. Herbie frowned and told me that was a hell of a lot of dough. I explained to him that knocking off a guy like Montana was almost as rough as knocking off Capone himself, and actually the price was cheap because I needed an assignment. Business was slow. Well, in the end, Herbie said okay and wrote me a check for five-grand. All he had. I took it, but told him I couldn't turn on the heat until I actually had the other fifteen—not that I didn't trust him, but business was business. He said I'd have the balance in two weeks and I said Montana would be cold meat very soon after that."

Slant stopped talking as he brought the car to a halt at a three-way intersection. He glanced at the signs, nodded, and tugged the car to the right. "Not much further now," he said.

Elsie nodded. "No. In fact, we're getting to where he dumped me in the snow. The doctor's place is just ahead."

"Yes," Slant said, "if he's still there. Things change."

"Yes." Elsie yawned. "Did Herbie come round with the rest of the dough?"

Slant shook his head. "No. The two weeks went by, then a month, finally a couple months, and no sign of Herbie. I just forgot about it, considered his deposit as forfiet, and got a job that took me to Florida. From there I went to Diego, L.A., Frisco, and Seattle. I took a job up there and followed a guy to Australia, the Malay Peninsula, and Hong Kong. Then I took a job as bodyguard for a Chicago red-hot cooling off in Japan—it was kind of

like a vacation. Anyway, I guess it was eight years before I hit New York again. I went to see a prospective client in a swank joint on Fifth Avenue and after I left who did I run into but Herbie. And a ritzy, prosperous Herbie at that. He's got a Rolls, a chauffeur, a duplex-apartment, a house upstate, a couple nice kids—everything. In fact, he's just back from a Mediterranean cruise and really looks swell. He shook hands with me, insisted we have a drink together, and told me all I just said. He's a millionaire. Well, we kept talking and after a while I mentioned that I'd come up through Philadelphia and that I'd gotten word about his old friend Lew Montana down there. Lew was nothing now. He was on the skids, hitting the bottle, and living in a crummy room on Race Street. I told Herbie, half as a joke, that I'd be glad to bump Lew for a couple yards now—say five—if Herbie still wanted the job done. Herbie was very interested in all this and wanted to hear everything I'd heard about Lew. I told him. Lew had taken a fall, had ratted to the cops, was strictly a bum in all camps, and was stinking drunk whenever he could grub the price of a bottle. Herbie asked then if that was what I figured Lew Montana's life was worth—five hundred dollars. I told him it was a generous estimate—a plugged quarter would be closer, but five yards was my bottom price, even for a cockroach. Herbie laughed, whipped out a checkbook, and wrote me a check for a grand, saying, "You keep five-hundred and see that Lew Montana gets the other half. I'm sorry to hear he's down. He did the greatest favor anybody ever did for me in my life." I looked pretty surprised, I guess, for Herbie laughed some more and went on, 'He got me off that damn trumpet forever. If I'd gone on the way I was, I'd soon have been taking horse, lost my wife, and be a bum in the park or dead by now. I was plenty sore right after the thing happened and I was dead set on raising the fifteen-grand to get you to kill Montana. I went to an uncle of mine who got me a job selling sporting-goods and it turned out I was pretty good at it. Soon I had my own store, then another, and now I own the biggest chain of sport-shops in the country. So, on account of Montana, you see, I'm a successful, happy man instead of a hopped-up has-been musician.'

"And that's the story," Slant added, after a pause.

"So getting busted up turned out good for him?" Elsie asked.

"Yes."

"And you think what John Clement did to me was a favor?"

Slant shrugged. "Who knows? But one thing's sure—it happened and killing him won't change it."

"Maybe not," Elsie admitted. "But I'll sure feel better knowing he got the same as he dished out."

Slant brought the car to a stop.

"This should be the place. Right?"

"Yeah."

They sat silent for a couple seconds, then Elsie asked, "Did you give Montana the money?"

"No." Slant shook his head. "I figured I owed Herbie a favor, so when I passed through Philly about a month later I stopped at Montana's rooming-house. He was on a wine-binge. I bought him a bottle, walked him to an alley near 3rd and Vine, and shot him. I left him on a garbage pile with a dead cat. That closed the account. Ready?"

"I don't get it," Elsie frowned.

"If I'd given Herbie's money to Montana and told him where it came from, he'd have been on Herbie's neck like a leech within a month. You can't do a bum a favor." Slant chuckled. "And just handing him five yards would have been a terrible waste of good dough." Slant reached down and snapped off the radio. "Are you ready for our business?"

"Ready and waiting," Elsie replied. Her voice was hoarse and she breathed heavy. Slant nodded, unsnapped his small club bag, and removed a pair of heavy .45 Colt automatics. He hefted them and fitted them into holsters already fitted on a harness under his coat. Then he opened the car door.

4

They walked along a gravel path in semi-darkness, side by side. Elsie's high, thin heels wobbled on the uneven surface once or twice and she held Slant's arm for support. The big, flat ranch-house ahead was a shapeless black blob except for moments when the moon appeared between clouds and silhouetted it sharply. Two small windows showed a light, but it was dimmed by a heavy curtain.

"He's home," Slant said as they approached. "I phoned. Funny—I sort of expected a reception by a dog. Maybe a couple of them."

Elsie shook her head. "He hates dogs. Anytime a stray mutt wanders on the grounds he beats it to death. Or has Monk Callahan do it."

Slant's eyes narrowed. Unseen in the darkness, his jaw tightened and his face betrayed more feeling and expression than it had all day. He said softly:

"Good you told me. It's nice to know."

"You like dogs?"

"Yeah." With the word, Slant guided Elsie by the elbow, leading her up a short run of steps and onto a long porch that flanked the side of the house. Following it round to the front door, Slant said, "This is it. You stand off to one side."

Elsie moved as she was instructed while Slant pressed hard on the bell-button. There was a delay and then a bright porch light went on. In Slant's left hand, hanging limply at his side, was a Colt automatic. The slightly crooked smile was on his face.

Then a small panel in the door opened and behind a metal grillwork a man's face appeared. Monk Callahan. He said:

"Yes?"

Slant fired three shots. Two of the shots thundred directly through the door and the man's face vanished like a hit duck in a shooting-gallery. The third shot blasted the lock on the door and Slant kicked it open. Although it jammed hard against Monk's fallen body, there was room enough to pass. Slant rushed inside and with the motion brought his other .45 out. He pumped two more quick shots into Monk and then his eyes moved like swift arrows, darting in every direction at once. Elsie followed at his heels.

"Geez!" she muttered, "you sure don't play around." She looked at Monk Callahan's open-mouthed, bulging-eyed corpse and grinned, adding: "He never looked so good."

"Look out!" Slant cried. A burly, black-haired, middle-aged man wrapped in a flaming red bathrobe came running down the stairs. He had a gun in his hand.

"John Clement!" Elsie screamed. "It's him!"

Clement's gun roared while he was still moving down the steps. Two bullets lashed by Slant's head so close he heard the pinging whine of the slugs and felt the vacuum they created in passing. He grinned broadly and leveled his huge, dull-black Colts with cold precision. He squeezed both triggers, letting the .45's pour out slugs as fast as their reload actions could bang and slam. He was shooting low. A virtual wall of heavy bullets crashed into Clement's knees and thighs, cutting legs right from under him and spinning him as though he was a paper doll. He somersaulted down the long flight of stairs like a crazy flapping scarecrow; a red whirligig, bouncing, bumping, and careening. His gun arced across the wide room and struck the far wall.

In a matter of seconds he lay at the foot of the staircase, a sprawled grotesque figure in a twisted tangle of red cloth. Elsie ran over and bent down.

"He's still alive!" she exclaimed.

Slant shrugged, walked near, and raised one of his guns. "That's easy fixed."

Elsie pushed his arm aside. "No. I want him to see me. I want him to see me good and clear. I want him to know who sent him on his way to hell!" Falling to her knees, Elsie grabbed John Clement's head and shook it. "Wake up!" she commanded. "Wake up!"

"He saw you," Slant said, almost disinterestedly. "He can't last long. He's bleeding bad."

Elsie started slapping John Clement's face violently, and screaming, "Wake up, John! You're dying! You got to wake up or you'll bleed to death! Wake up! Wake up!"

John Clement moaned and his eyelids fluttered.

"That's it!" Elsie cried. "You can make it! Wake up! You don't want to die!"

Clement's eyes opened then and he muttered feebly: "Dying? Oh, my legs . . . Elsie?"

"Yes, it's Elsie. It's Elsie, John."

"Elsie! Help me . . . doctor . . ." Clement came to full consciousness and painfully tried to pull himself up on one elbow. "Doctor," he repeated. "Send for doctor . . ."

Slant was standing back out of the line of Clement's vision. He watched and said nothing, one gun still held in a light grip.

Taking Clement's head in her hands, Elsie put her face close to his. "Are you sure you know me, John? You know it's Elsie?"

"Yes, yes . . . Elsie . . . I know . . . get doctor . . ."

Elsie stood up, satisfied. "Yeah, I'll get you a doctor. In a pig's eye!"

"A priest," Clement moaned. "Dying. Get a priest . . . please, Elsie. Never mind doctor . . . just priest . . ."

Elsie sneered while she towered above the wounded man. "Priest! No priest could keep you out of hell! And you'll go there with my best wishes!" With these words, she raised her foot and stomped Clement's face, digging into the soft flesh with the sharp-tipped heel of her shoe. Clement screamed in agony and vainly tried to use his weak arms to protect himself. Elsie laughed. She kicked his arms away, and again and again brought the red spike down, chopping with all her weight, until Clement was completely unrecognizable and certainly dead. Elsie's shoe and stocking was a mess of pulpy blood.

Slant watched this performance without comment. He made no move when Elsie finally tired of kicking the dead man and staggered back, looking weakly round for a chair. She got to a large overstuffed one and collapsed into it. Looking at Slant, she said with a trembling voice, "Now, by God, we're even up."

"Yeah." Slant took a cigarette from his case and lit it. He went over and offered one to Elsie. She took it with a shaking hand.

"He wanted a priest," she said. "He wanted to confess. I sent him to hell."

Slant shrugged. "I never go for last-minute conversions."

Staring at Slant with wide eyes, Elsie mumbled, "I couldn't have done that to anybody in the world but John Clement. I couldn't hate anybody else like that."

"Yeah," Slant said, without much conviction. "Well, we'd better get out of here now. You'll have to clean that mess off your feet."

Almost as if in surprise, Elsie looked down at her shoes, went very pale, got half-way up from the chair, and then fainted dead away.

5

Consciousness of a sort returned

to her in the car. Slant was driving along at his steady, monotonous pace, eyes unswervingly centered on the road. The radio was not playing.

"My feet," Elsie mumbled, "they're cold." The words came out in a bewildered, hurt tone.

Slant nodded. "I washed off your shoes and stockings. They're wrapped in a towel on the back seat. The car heater's on; it'll be warmer in a minute."

"Shoes . . . stockings?" Elsie repeated the words vaguely. "Was I a bad girl and got my feet dirty?"

Glancing quickly at Elsie, Slant frowned. He saw her sitting with her feet drawn up under her skirt childishly, staring wide-eyed at him. And as he continued to look, she began sucking her thumb. "Was I, Daddy?" she asked again.

Slant yanked the car to the side of the road and stopped. He put on the overhead light.

"Are we stopping 'cause I was bad?" Elsie asked. Her voice had all the plaintive whine of a five-year old.

"Maybe," Slant replied. Two lines of annoyance creased his forehead and his pale gray eyes considered deeply. "Who are you?" he asked, staring at Elsie.

"Daddy's little girl," was the prompt reply he got.

"Damn!" he muttered, and reaching across he slapped Elsie sharply on the face. Twice—three times. "Snap out of it!"

Elsie began screaming and bawling. "I wasn't bad! I didn't break Cathy's doll! She broke it herself!"

All expression dropped from Slant's face. "All right," he said soothingly, "Daddy believes you. All right." He shut off the overhead light in the car, lit a cigarette, and sat staring into the darkness ahead. Elsie kept sobbing in muffled tones.

While Slant smoked, two or three long-haul trucks came roaring up from behind, whizzed past, and proceeded down the big stretch of straight highway ahead. He watched their red taillights grow fainter and fainter, and finally sink out of sight in the far distance. Some of them winked out all at once; others seemed to gradually fade. He thought about it. Then, when his cigarette was finished, he crushed the butt carefully in the dashboard ashtray and turned to Elsie who watched him expectantly. He said:

"Daddy's sorry he slapped you. You want to take a nice walk with Daddy?"

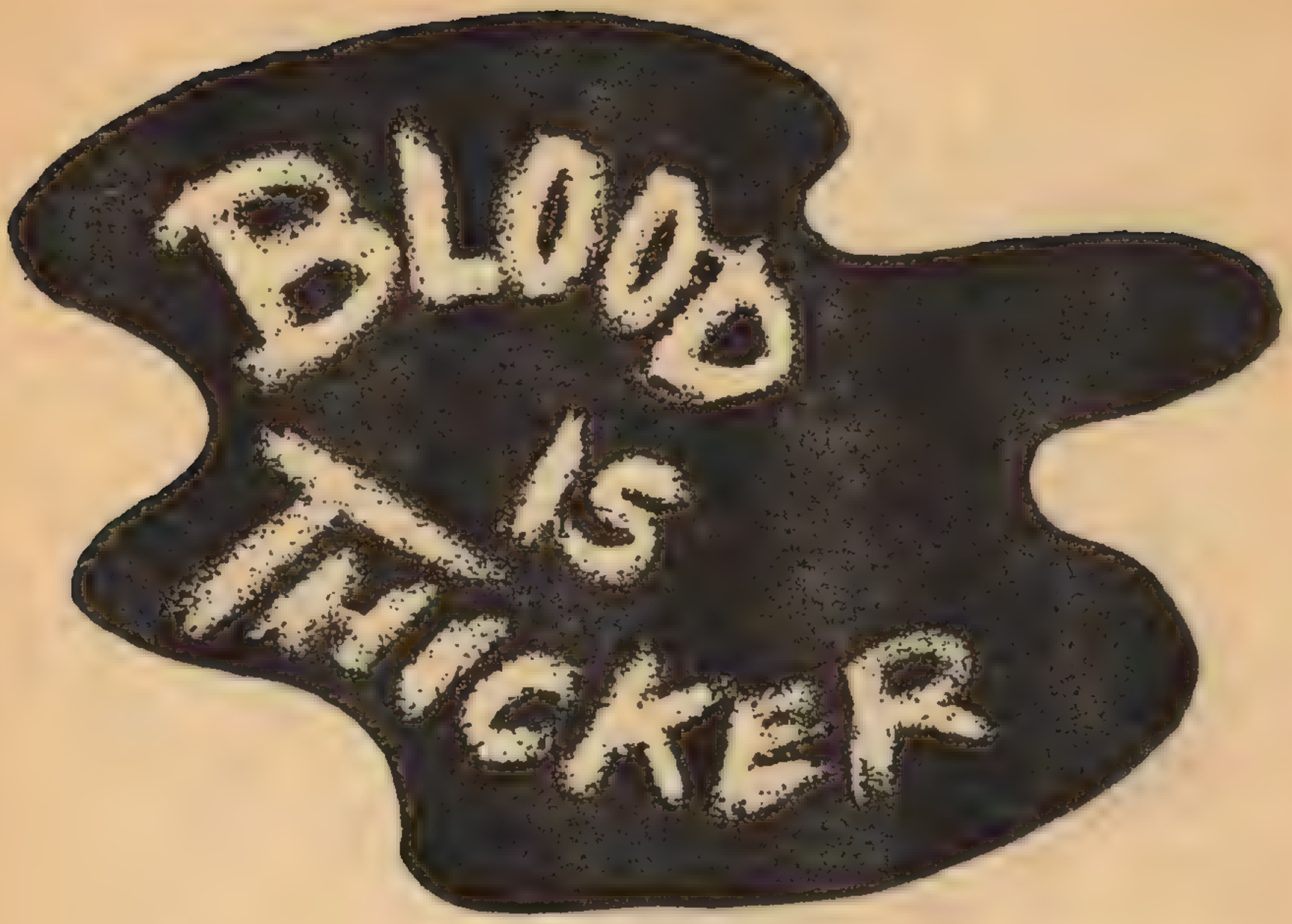
"Oh yes!" Elsie clapped her hands.

Slant reached back for the towel that contained Elsie's shoes and stockings. "Then put these on, like a good girl."

With a good deal of fumbling and a lot of excited baby-talk, Elsie got the shoes on. "They're like mommy's shoes," she said in surprise, "they got high-heels."

"Yes," Slant said. He opened the car door and added, "Come on now, we'll take a nice long walk over to that field."

"Oh goody!" Elsie cried. "I want to see a poliwog!" She jumped out of the car and skipped lightly toward the low fence that edged the highway. Slant walked steadily behind her, his face expressionless as it most always was. In the moonlight it was gaunt and skull-like. His left hand rested lightly in his coat pocket.



BY

DAVE HILL

As brother and sister, Tony and Sondra had little in common . . . except of course their father's will.

HE's as healthy as sin," Tony was saying. "He'll be here to dance on our graves if you don't do it. We've *got* to carry it off!"

His sister Sondra sat opposite him in the paneled drawing room, watching him with amused distaste. She was tall, a gold and silver girl, athletic and vibrant—everything her snivelling, pale, fox-eyed brother was not. All his courage was in his mouth, and he was being courageous now.

"Let's go over the plan once more," he said, his voice coiling around Sondra like some slimy thing. "We've got to be absolutely sure—no chance for a slip-up."

"But—why *me?* Are you sure I —?" Sondra looked up at her brother, her eyes wide in mock-confusion. She wanted to force the damning admission from him one last time.

"I haven't got the guts—is that what you want me to say?" Tony's

voice was a hoarse whimper. "All right—I'll say it again. I'm afraid! I'd get sick as soon as I saw the blood—you *know* that. I'm not sure I could even point the gun at him—is that what you want to hear me say?"

Sondra nodded. "Umm humm," she said, smiling faintly.

"Then let's get the story straight, once and for all. You're to go into the study and shoot him with—you know, one of those old Belgian shotguns." He waved a hand. "You'll know—you know more about such things than I do. And then, when the police get here, we just tell them we were going hunting and we . . . er, *you* . . ."

"Me," Sondra said. "It would sound better that way."

"That's the beauty of it, yes. And you were loading up—to see if some new shells would fit the bore of the old gun, or whatever—"

"And there was a terrible accident."

Tony nodded. "And I rushed in immediately afterwards—ties up very neatly, don't you think? Simplicity itself. But then, brilliance is always a simple—" A sudden squeal of rage drifted in the window, cutting off his words, and his face whitened at the sound.

"Just a hog being slaughtered down at the main barn," Sondra said. "What will you do when the real thing comes?"

"That's different. I'll think of the money involved." He nodded to himself. "The money. We should have done this all years ago—right after Mother died. Before he sank all that money in this place—imagine, the fool has spent a quarter of a million dollars—money that *we* should have—on pigs and cows!" Tony spit on the tile in front of the fireplace. "All that money on an experimental farm!"

"As I recall," Sondra said with a trace of a smile, "cows made a lot of money for father."

"But that was business—it made sense. A chain of dairies is one thing. But, all that money on a *hobby*—" The sound of another hog defying the slaughterer wafted through the window again and Tony jumped up and pulled the window shut with such violence that the glass cracked.

"I wonder," Sondra said with an easy smile, "if I can trust *you* not to crack."

"Of course you can," Tony shot back at her. "For all of that money I could stand up to anything."

"Except actually killing him, hmmm?"

"We've been through that!" Tony said. "It will just seem better if you do it—a shotgun isn't a woman's weapon." He wanted to throw "it was your idea anyway" into her face—but he honestly couldn't recall just who had first raised the possibility that they might murder their father. "Besides, what if they should learn of all the money I've

lost gambling, and call that a motive?"

"And there *is* the minor point that you haven't any guts, isn't there? You get sick just thinking about blood, and violence, and anything nasty, don't you, hmmm?"

Tony sat down again, wilted. "Just do it—this afternoon." A moment later the crunch of gravel announced the arrival of Anthony Caldwell Sr. "There he is now. Don't fail me."

"I have as much to lose as you do," Sondra said with a tight smile. "Or gain."

* * *

Two hours later Tony decided it was time. He and Sondra were alone in the house with the old man; the maid was shopping and the butler had been drafted for the slaughtering down at the barn. Anthony Senior had even been considerate enough to closet himself in the study—where the guns were kept.

Tony stood in the hall with Sondra, almost calm, now that the time had come. "I'm depending on you," he said pointlessly as Sondra reached for the knob to the study door.

She smiled a little smile at her brother. "Mutual, hmm?"

Tony stood for what seemed like hours—but was only four minutes—waiting. Finally it came. The sudden *BAWOOOOM!* of a shotgun, followed by a hoarse groan and a heavy thud. His hand trembled as he reached for the knob. For a moment fear took him, and he felt spasmodic jerkings of the muscles in his back, the cold trickle of sweat on his wrists.

A moment later the door opened and a poised and still smiling Sondra confronted him. "You can come in now," she said. "It's all over."

He stepped into the long room. At one end stood the desk, flanked by bookshelves; at the other end the wall was thick with racked guns. A shotgun lay on the green carpet near the far end, surrounded by the mess of a suddenly dropped box of shells.

"Where is he?"

Sondra pointed to a huge red leather divan, midway down the room, its back three feet from the window and parallel with the wall "Behind the sofa there," she said. "He was walking over to look out the window. "Even as she spoke the sounds of enraged hogs drifted in through the open window.

Tony walked over to the sofa hesitantly. Resting one knee on it, he glanced quickly over the back. His father lay face down on the floor, stradling the thick red ooze of blood on either side of him. Tony almost vomited.

"Good job," he said, jumping back almost instantly. "Now just stick to the story." He repeated himself, fighting back the nausea. "Stick to the story."

Sondra was already dialing a number. She looked into his

blanched face and smiled. "Messy, isn't it?"

Five minutes later the doorbell rang and she answered it. A moment later two men followed her back into the study. The tall, night-school type shook Tony's hand. "Lieutenant Stevens," he said in a warm voice. "I suppose you know we'll have to ask you some questions."

Tony nodded. "I understand."

"Terrible thing," the short, red-faced man behind Stevens said, identifying himself as Detective Wallin. He repeated the words several times, his head bobbing up and down like an apple on a string.

Stevens took a chair by the window and looked up at Tony. "Suppose you tell us what happened."

"Well . . . . I—" Tony looked hopeless. "I was at home. The doctor told me to take it easy—sinus is acting up. I was in the library, reading, when Sondra came home. She'd been off somewhere, shopping I think."

"Did you see her come in?"

"No. She went straight into the study." He glanced over at Sondra, waiting the shock that would begin to show in her face. "I couldn't help but hear them—they began shouting, and arguing violently. About money again."

Lieutenant Stevens looked up, surprise in his mild blue eyes. "Arguing!" He looked over at Sondra. "But Miss Anthony said—"

Sondra shook her head vigorously, the realization of what Tony was doing plain on her face. "No! He's lying!" She shouted. "I—"

Stevens raised a pacifying hand. "You can tell your side in a moment Miss Anthony." He turned back to Tony. "Go on."

"As I said, they were arguing." Tony cleared his throat, delighting in the moment. "They'd fought a good deal of late—always over money." He glanced over at Sondra, a vicious humor dancing in his eyes. This was exquisite. "Anyway, I heard my father yell—'No, don't do it! Sondra No!'—those were his . . . his last words."

He was cut off by Sondra's sudden scream of protest. "No! No! It's a lie! A lie! He's—" She made a move as though to leap at him and Wallin took hold of her arm, forcing her back into her chair. "All in due time Miss Anthony," he said quietly. "Wait until your brother has told his side of the story." Sondra sat there, her face a blank mask.

"And then I ran into the study." Tony shrugged. "She'd shot him. She turned the gun on me, said she would kill me too, unless I would help her, give her an alibi, or something. I said that I would—of course. And . . ." He looked Sondra full in the face, sighing piously. "My own sister—and I never really knew her."

Stevens stood up abruptly. "That'll be all," he said. He mo-

tioned to his partner. "Mike? Let's go."

"But . . . but . . . aren't you going to arrest her?" Tony's voice rose to a baffled whine. "She killed him! She *killed him!*"

But in a moment he was screaming at a closed door.

"Shut up!"

Tony froze. He knew his father's voice! Slowly he turned around. When he saw his father standing upright, behind the sofa, he tried to scream, but no sound would come from his lips. Instead, he stood there, gaping in terror.

Anthony Senior shook his head. "I never would have believed it of you," he said. "Kill your own father, would you? And just to get my rotten money."

Tony found his voice. "But the shotgun! You're dead! I saw you—the blood—you're *dead!*" His voice rose to a keening shriek. *"Dead!"*

"The shotgun?" Sondra laughed, "I shot it out the window."

"And this is plain old pig's blood," Caldwell finished. "Bucket's under the desk. Sondra sloshed some on me, some on the floor. Then I just laid down and played dead."

"But—"

"We knew you couldn't stand to look at a "corpse" for more than a second—blood makes you sick, remember?" Sondra's voice was a mocking sneer. "You were easy to fool."

Anthony Senior shook his head. "Well, it settled one thing—you won't have to worry about my money any longer. You're out of my will for good now Tony. My lawyer will be here tonight." He scraped some of the caked blood from his suit thoughtfully. "At first I simply couldn't believe it, when Sondra came to me and told me of the horrible scheme you're proposed to her. But then I went along with her, and decided to carry the hoax off— just to see for myself."

"And then you tried to double-cross me in the bargain!" Sondra broke into shrill laughter.

"But . . . but . . ." Tony was like a broken, hysterical record. "But . . . the detectives . . ."

"Even unemployed actors have to eat," Sondra said neatly, smiling.

She was still smiling when she left the study a moment later, the memory of a hopeless, speechless, totally abject Tony in her mind. She began to hum softly to herself. It was all hers now. All—just as soon as she found a nice safe way to get rid of the old man. Sondra was confident she could manage that, for where there's a will . . .

THE HELPFUL COP

Lundgren was an intuitive cop. He knew how to handle people . . . even nuts like old Tressler.

BY THOMAS MILLSTEAD

WHAT makes a top cop?

Three things I'd say, and I've seen them come and go. Brains. Guts. And a kind of antenna put together out of exposed nerve ends. Sensitivity, I guess you'd call it. It's seldom you find the three in one package.

Me, now. I'm brawny enough to dish it out. And I've got an IQ I don't have to apologize for. But that sensitivity thing, that *feeling* for what's unspoken in a situation—nowhere. Maybe that's why I never made it past sergeant.

But it's beautiful to watch in operation. Lundgren, my partner years back, he had it. Sensitivity, imagination, instinct, whatever you want to call it.

Oh, he had the rest of it, too. Brains? Loaded. Tough? Many's the scrape we've been in and he always came out grinning and rubbing his knuckles.

He had them all going for him, all right. And how well he knew it. You take that day we went to old man Tressler's.

This Tressler was the last of a family that had made its pile in some long forgotten business and gone to hell in separate and peculiar ways. He still lived in their old castle outside the city, cut off by walls of trees from suburbia springing up all around him. He was, though seldom seen, well known as a leading local oddball.

He had only one employee living on the estate. This was Edouard Rudetz, the gardener, whose sister

had called us to report him missing. It seems Edouard hadn't come over for pot roast that noon. It was a Sunday and Edouard, a bachelor of fixed habits, always came over for pot roast on Sunday. More, he'd told her on the phone that morning that he'd definitely be over—and also that he was thinking about quitting Tressler because the old man's fits of strangeness were scaring the gardener witless.

Well, it takes more than an unaccounted for few hours to make a legitimate missing persons case, but Lundgren and I were in the area so we buzzed over.

What opened the door was a thin heap of ancient flesh bundled up in a scarf and several sweaters. Tottering beside this relic—rheumy eyed and asleep on its feet—was an elderly, foul smelling Great Dane. We asked Tressler about the gardener.

"So!" he said. "Two fine young men have come to call on me. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you," said Lundgren, radiating amiability.

Shuffling slowly, one arm stiff at his side, Tressler led us through some dim rooms to a cluttered library.

"Won't you be seated?"

"Thank you, sir," said Lundgren.

"About Rudetz, the gardener—" I began.

"Magnificent day, has it not been?" Tressler commented. "But it is soon to end."

The huge dog collapsed with a thud at the old man's feet. Tressler scratched its ear with one hand. The other, the right, lay strangely inert in his lap. His skin was as white and fragile as tissue paper, but there was something sly dancing in his protruding, vein-splashed eyes. He gave me the willies.

"Your gardener," I said. "His sister reported him missing. When did you see him last?"

"Eh? The gardener? Can't recall. I'm here alone. An ill, aged man. Another seizure, just before you called." He touched his right arm. "Paralyzed now. Utterly useless to me. How soon the sun sets this time of year."

"Sorry you're not well," said Lundgren. "Can we do anything?"

A definitely mischievous look flickered in Tressler's eyes, then he lowered his head. "Not at the moment, no."

Lundgren was on his feet, smiling and casual. Those nerve ends of his were already bristling.

"Quite a library you've got here."

"I spend the great balance of my time here. I've been able to buy what I've sought. I haven't stinted."

Lundgren pulled out a book. "'Carpathian Curiosities: Annals of the Undead.'"

"The 1811 edition. Very rare. My studies, as you see, are of the occult."

"About the gardener," I broke in.

"What would you gentlemen say," Tressler asked, his voice soft and shy, "to a game of croquet?"

"A what?" But I knew what he'd said. Enough, I told myself. We'll haul him downtown pronto. If we can't get anything out of him maybe the boys in white can. I liked none of it, this doddering creep or his filthy dog or his mouldy books.

"It is a passion with me," Tressler went on. "One game, eh? To indulge an old man's whim? One game before sunset?"

I'd forgotten Lundgren's genius for handling people, for mentally frisking them without their knowing they'd been touched.

"Croquet? Wonderful idea." You'd swear his enthusiasm was genuine.

"But," I burst out, "we got to—"

Lundgren winked at me and turned to Tressler. "Detective Hoeft here used to be champion in his precinct."

"Really? Splendid!" Tressler shot to his feet, his bulging eyes glistening like a small boy's on Christmas morning. "But we haven't much time. It will be dusk soon. Come, Bruce!"

Feebly, he snapped the fingers of his good hand and the dog stirred.

"Come, all of you! The set's in the potting shed." Tressler scurried from the room.

"Hurry it up," Lundgren said to me, grinning. "We don't want the game called on account of darkness."

"Lundgren, if you think I'm going to—"

But he was already gone, hotfooting it after the old man. All I could do was follow.

In the shed, Tressler, with one arm, scooped up a stake, some mallets and wickets and dashed out again. The Great Dane padded along behind. Lundgren and I grabbed the rest of the gear. The mallets were old and well dented. The balls were considerably nicked, too, and grass stained.

Down a flagstone path we trotted, beside a garden where the bright summer colors had barely faded, under trees still thick with leaves.

A wide prairie opened up, flat and close-cropped. Rudetz must have been tending it carefully. But we went beyond it, down a hill and into a little bowl hemmed in by hedges. Here the turf was lumpy and irregular and the shadows thick.

Tressler glanced wildly at the vanishing sun, then scuttled over the dark ground, face bent low. He pushed one post in and began hammering it, one-handed, with a mallet. He staggered back, gasping.

"No use. Not able."

"We'll do it," said Lundgren, soothingly. "Settle down. There's time to get a game in yet."

He pounded in the stake with hard, swift strokes.

"Now, where do you want the other one?"

"Eh? Oh, in that area. Yes. About there."

Under the old man's supervision,

Lundgren and I then shoved in the wickets. "Look," I said, sotto voice, "the city doesn't pay us to play lawn games with senile suspects. We're here to get information, remember?"

Lundgren only smiled, dazzlingly confident. Like I mentioned, he had everything going for him, and he knew it.

"Do you want first shot, Mr. Tressler?" he asked.

"You are my guests. Please proceed."

Lundgren eyed the first two wickets professionally, tapped and spanned them.

"Excellent! Excellent!" The old man hopped from one foot to the other. He'd become, over the past few minutes, positively exuberant.

"You and Edouard," Lundgren asked with great disinterest, "play much croquet?"

The old man giggled, one hand to his mouth like a schoolgirl.

"Edouard? No. Edouard was not what one would call—companionable. Your shot, Mr. Hoeft."

"Look, I haven't played for years. I—"

"Your shot, Mr. Hoeft," Lundgren echoed, mockingly.

I tried it and botched it.

"Too bad!" Tressler's good arm swung easily and whacked his ball through the guard hoops. His next drive socked Lundgren's ball and he played this for a free shot which zoomed to the first of the far wickets.

"Nice one. You must play a lot."

"Often, yes. But usually by myself. How refreshing to face real antagonists."

Lundgren reached the hoop the old man had just threaded. I made my first wicket, overshot the second and had to slink back to set myself up for my next onslaught. The dog lay prostrate at the far end of the field. He slept loudly, his lungs wheezing, his nose snuffling.

Tressler's thin body quavered as he stooped, but his aim was sure. The ball stopped just short of the mid-field wicket, a perfect lie. Lundgren barely scraped through his hoop, then hit a long one that sped past the old man's. I sliced mine and the ball bounced back off the wire of the second wicket.

"You weren't," Lundgren remarked, "on any sort of social basis with Edouard?"

Tressler eased through the middle hoop, then powdered one, straight as an arrow, to within a foot of the next arch. As Lundgren bent for his shot, the old man replied.

"Naturally not. The fellow was a vampire, you know."

I stared across the rough, weed-splattered expanse. Velvet shadow had absorbed all of the greenery now. There was a mild chill in the air. The Great Dane whined and shivered, troubled in its dreams. This was suddenly like something I'd been reading to my daughter.

"Alice in Wonderland." A croquet match the queen played with flamingos as mallets and hedgehogs for balls. This was as daffy. Which way to the looking glass that led back to the real world?

Lundgren's composure was a marvel. He didn't straighten, stiffen or hesitate. He tapped his ball neatly and it headed obediently back to the middle wicket. He waited until it stopped rolling.

Then he said: "Oh, really? Was he?"

"No doubt about it. Mr. Hoeft?"

"Yes?"

"Your shot."

"Oh. Yes." This time, surprisingly, I made my wicket. Tressler lazed effortlessly through the far right arch. His free wallop put him in excellent shape for a go at the two guard wickets at the far side of the course. Lundgren, scowling in concentration, felt the sod for obstructions, tamped down some of the rougher clods and spanned the middle arch. The questions were piling up inside me, but I let Lundgren set the pace. He was the boy wonder of this team.

My turn again and I wobbled a little way further. Tressler rolled through one wicket, then the other, then hit the stake.

"Good going," Lundgren called.

"You gentlemen will have to get humping to beat me now!"

He belt a beauty straight back through the two wickets, an aggressive start on the final circuit.

"Well, I won't go down without a fight," said Lundgren, squinting along the path he'd have to blaze to the next wicket. "You're sure about Rudetz, are you?"

"Absolutely. I know such things. You saw my library. Oh, I'd seen him eyeing me during the days. Cunning, calculating. I'd seen those teeth, flashing, carnivorous . . . I knew, some night, he'd come for me . . . Intolerable! Intolerable!"

One putt and Lundgren was through his wicket.

"So you did away with him?"

The old man smiled wanly. "It wasn't as simple as that. Come, come, Mr. Hoeft—shoot!"

I did so, getting too much muscle in it, knocking my ball out of bounds. His left arm stroking in the usual nonchalant style, Tressler made it to the lip of his next wicket.

"Not simple at all," he complained. "A man with my disabilities."

"Good shot," Lundgren complimented. "But you did manage it?"

"Well, I had to use subterfuge. I had him dig the grave himself. Told him it was for old Bruce there, that I planned to put the animal to sleep."

"I believe I'd better set you back a bit," said Lundgren, smashing his ball toward the old man's. He missed. Tressler snickered.

"Rudetz dug the grave, of course," said Lundgren.

Again the old man's hand cov-

ered his giggling mouth. "Oh, yes. Neatly. In squares. A mosaic. So that, when replaced, they hardly looked disturbed. I'll wager you haven't noticed them. This is not my usual croquet court, you know."

This was a conversation I wanted to miss no part of. I slammed my ball back across the field.

"So you're pursuing me, too, Mr. Hoeft? Well, it will be a battle to the final stake."

"But you got him in all right, Mr. Tressler?"

"Eh? Who?"

"Edouard. Into the grave?"

"Oh, yes. But how incredibly difficult! A man of my frailty! I had just gotten the final piece of sod on when this newest seizure struck. I could scarcely struggle back to the house. It was frightful, knowing night would be coming on, knowing he might reappear, knowing the task was still incomplete. Then, of course, you gentlemen rang."

His popping eyes, suddenly boyish and twinkling, darted over to Lundgren. "I'm going to do something wicked," he warned. A smart rap and his ball had rammed Lundgren's. Tressler cackled. "You're going for a ride now, young man!"

It was asking too much for me to keep my mouth shut any longer.

"What the hell do you mean the job was incomplete? You killed Rudetz and buried him out here. What else was there to do?"

"Killed him? Oh, no. The blow to the head wasn't fatal. I didn't have the strength for that. He was breathing as I placed him in the ground. Oh, no. There was a final step. One I was powerless to effect myself."

His shriveled face beamed upward at Lundgren. "But two fine young men came to call upon me."

Lundgren was quiet a while. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why, I thought it was common knowledge. Nothing can kill a vampire *except a stake through the heart*. Didn't you feel it when you drove the post in, young man? Didn't you feel it? Eh? Eh?"

Lundgren took a long, slow look at the mallet he was holding. His face seemed to be disintegrating.

"The stake . . ." he breathed. "But he was dead? Before I . . .?"

"The sod's not packed in tightly," said Tressler. "And he'd only been in there a short while. We'll never know now, will we?"

Lundgren's hands started trembling. The mallet slipped and fell to the ground. The hands kept trembling.

He had them all okay, Lundgren did: brains, guts, instinct.

Now? Oh, he's still with us. Clerk in the records section. That's Lundgren over there, as a matter of fact. The guy trying to light the cigarette. It gives him trouble. Those twitching hands, you know.

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